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**The Stone Bell (Creative Writing Project) &
Accompanying Critical Commentary: Temporality,
Place & Memory**

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The Stone Bell

October 1912 – The Side of the Angels

Chapter One

Without warning, she tugged at my sheets and said 'Wake up! Wake up! It's today!' although I was halfway awake already. I shook the covers off as Mam left the room. I heard her going to the room next door, her good shoes beating a clock-clock on the floorboards. Gentle tapping on Anna's door.

In the quiet, I could hear Mam saying 'Anna, dear. It's today.' She was speaking so slowly. I didn't hear Anna respond; only the creak of her door as Mam entered her room.

My feet stuck to the cool floor a little. I went over to the washbowl, cupped water in my hands and splashed it on my face and over my hair, before getting dressed in a light shirt and dark brown trousers. I tousled the top of my head dry with a towel, pulled on a pair of socks, and walked into the hallway. The smell of fresh bread was thick in the air.

I heard hushed voices, maybe crying too, coming from Anna's room and thought for half a moment about going in to see if she was alright. Nah, butt. Mam was in there, she could remedy whatever was going on. That was her job, really. I turned to the narrow staircase and made my way to the kitchen.

'Good morning,' I said. Da was wearing a stiff white collar with a black tie, a grey waistcoat and a black jacket. I'd never seen him dressed up like that before. He looked up from the boiled egg that he was very cautiously attempting to saw the top off.

'Careful. Don't want to make a mess of myself.' He squinted, not wearing his spectacles. 'Why aren't you dressed properly?'

'Because I'd like an egg.'

'Sorry,' said Da, 'this is the last one. It's mine.' With that, he pulled off the lid of the egg.

I sat down at the table opposite him and reached for the bread in the middle of the table, tearing off a chunk. 'I'll just have bread.'

'You should be slicing that, not tearing it. Especially today.'

'Some days aren't more bread-slicey than others, you know.' I started buttering the chunk of bread.

'I know that,' said Da, 'but if your mother catches you...'

'Why aren't you dressed?' Mam had entered the room. 'You can't wear those old clothes today. Not in front of the Powells. Get back upstairs and get dressed, now.'

I looked at Da's black cloth tie, closing the starched white collar around his thick pink throat. 'We aren't even leaving the house for an hour.'

'David Farley, you are seventeen. You are not a child. Do not make me speak to you as if you are.' She sat down at the end of the table and picked up the bread knife. She pulled the breadboard towards her and looked at the torn end of the loaf, emitting a loud sigh. Then she began sawing. She managed to eat about half a slice before looking irritably at me again. 'Well?'

Da was jabbing at his egg with a spoon, ignoring what was going on around him. 'That's alright,' I said, 'I'll go put my fine clothes on.' I stood up and turned back to the door.

'Is Anna not coming down for her breakfast?' asked Da.

'Anna's fine. She'll come down when she's ready,' said Mam. 'Pass me down the butter.'

I closed the door – not slamming it, but not too gently, either – and tried my best not to stomp up the stairs. When Joe and I find rooms together, I thought, I won't have to put up with this.

At least Anna seemed to have stopped crying. I couldn't hear anything coming from her room, anyway. Why was she crying? Silly girl, I thought. She was

supposed to be happy. It was her choice to go with a lad from the Dock, not anyone else's.

I hadn't realised that I had been just standing still in the hallway when she opened her door. She had the same dark hair and thin face as me, though obviously without the patchy beard. 'Oh! Good morning, David. You frightened me, standing out here like a ghost.' Her eyes were wide and red-rimmed.

'I didn't even notice I was doing it.' I put a hand on her shoulder. She had always been theatrical, as Da liked to say. Melodramatic, Mam sometimes said. 'How are you feeling, Anna?'

'I'm very happy, really,' she said, the corners of her mouth turning up. She wasn't smiling. 'I am. Of course I am. I'm marrying John today. What a silly thing to ask, how I'm feeling. Now, get dressed, we're having breakfast as a family.' She pushed past me, still wearing her nightdress.

I opened my bedroom door and sat on the bed. I was supposed to be a grown-up now. I'd left school. I had a job. Anna was supposed to be a grown-up now. She was marrying a man. So why did Mam just tell me what I should be doing? Why was Anna crying if she was about to enjoy the happiest day of her life?

I looked up. My fine clothes were hanging up in the wardrobe. I took off my heavy tweed trousers and soft shirt and took out the black suit, starched white shirt, and black tie. It all felt itchy and cold, like I knew it would. The high collar was tight on my neck, and the seams holding the front of the shirt together rubbed on my nipples. I tried shifting the shirt around, but the fit was too good. My nipples would be trouble all day.

Feeling grateful that I wouldn't be moving around too much, I pulled on the waistcoat and buttoned it up, then unbuttoned it again. I'd forgotten about the tie, which I looped around pulled as tight as Da had his. I was right. The shirt collar pressed against my neck, and I could almost feel the skin reddening.

I buttoned up the waistcoat again, put on the jacket, and looked under the bed. My good shoes were not there. I sat on the edge of the bed again, scratching my head. There was nowhere else they could be. I stood up, looked in the wardrobe, even the drawers. Finding nothing, I sat down. I hoped I hadn't left them with the muddy boots by the back door.

Deciding that Mam would have found them there and would be ready to scold me whatever happened now, I went back downstairs. Mam, Da, and Anna were sat at the table without speaking. The only sound in the room was a slight undercurrent of chewing noises. 'Has anyone seen my good shoes?' I braced myself and readied an apology in my head. That way, it would sound more real.

'Yes, dear,' said Mam, smiling at me, 'I brought them down here to shine last night. Sorry, I must have put them in our room with your father's. Let me get them.' She stood up, still smiling, and walked out into the hall.

'How's Mam feeling now?' I asked, puzzled.

'Stop asking how everyone's feeling,' said Anna, 'everyone's feeling fine. It's a good day.'

'Your sister's right,' said Da, 'let's not talk about how we're feeling. Your mother couldn't be happier. Let's all try to stay that way.' He smiled at Anna with the last sentence. I was still confused. Now Da was out of sorts too. 'Sit down, David. You didn't finish your bread earlier.'

I sat at my place and thought about eating my bread with a knife and fork to make Anna smile properly, but decided not to. 'Could I have some butter?' Nobody answered. Da coughed and wiped the corners of his mouth. 'Please?'

'That's better.' Da put his napkin down, looked around his plate, then squinted at Anna's plate. 'Have you got the butter over there, Anna?'

'Sorry, yes,' she said, picking up the butter dish. 'Sorry. Here, David.'

'No need to be sorry.' I smiled at her as I took the butter. She looked puzzled. Again, I thought about saying something, but thought better of it. I felt very aware of

the way I was picking up butter on my knife-edge and folding it over the bread in my hand.

‘Here, I have your shoes. They’re so shiny.’ Mam came back and squatted next to my chair, before attempting to put my right shoe on my right foot.

‘Mam!’ I said, laughing because she’d managed to tickle me, ‘I can put my own shoes on!’

‘Well, I was only trying to help you because we’re late!’ she said, throwing the shoes down on the floor next to me. Anna got up and left the room without saying anything. ‘Oh, Anna!’ Mam rushed out of the room after her.

I looked at Da and shrugged, but he only scowled back. ‘Why did you have to say that, David? For-’ He paused, to stop himself saying ‘God’s sake’, then decided he would anyway. ‘For God’s sake.’

‘But what did I do?’

Da stood up and pushed his chair in, its legs scraping loudly on the flagstones. ‘Just tie your bloody laces,’ he said.

Twenty minutes later, Da was shutting the front door. He was smiling again, but I didn’t think his mood had improved particularly. Anna at least was looking a little less tearful, and Mam had the fire back in her, seemingly without the confusion. Anna wasn’t wearing her best dress yet, as we were going to walk down from Eastback to the chapel down by the castle. Instead, she’d put on an elegant dark green dress with her very best dress in an old leather bag that Da was carrying.

‘Are we all ready to go?’ Mam knew that we were, but she wanted us to know that she knew.

‘Yes, I’m ready.’ Anna took a tiny step forward towards the edge of the pavement. Da took a step of exactly the same size, which looked a little odd, as he was a lot bigger than her, and put his arm around her.

‘Proud of you, girl,’ he said, ‘you’re growing up.’

‘Don’t start, Llew,’ said Mam, ‘that’s quite enough of that.’

‘Quite enough of that,’ said Anna, looking in the direction of the chapel.

I had decided to stay quiet, so I looked at my shoes, which for all their shining and cleaning looked quite dull and black in the thin light of the overcast sky.

‘How are you, David? You’ve barely said a word.’ Anna put a hand on my shoulder.

I nodded. ‘I’m happy if you are. Let’s go.’

Normally, when walking up Eastback and through Pembroke, it would just be me and Da, talking about work, or the boys at the Sunday rugby, or the drinking after Sunday rugby. But today, the chatter was grey and still, like the weather. ‘Funny weather for October,’ said Da, ‘it’s normally windier.’

‘Glad it’s not,’ said Mam, ‘remember our wedding day? Clothes flapping about like a seagull’s wings.’

‘Seagulls wings don’t really flap though, do they? They sort of glide.’ Dad chortled, and a bird cackled with him. As if by saying ‘seagull’ my parents had summoned one. I didn’t see it, but it kept cawing and it couldn’t have been any other kind of bird.

‘Today everyone’s wings will sit still,’ announced Anna, sounding oddly proud, ‘like a duck. Still, but elegant.’ Silly girl. I thought about the ducks on the Mill Pond, the way that their heads dipped into the water for scraps of sinking bread while their bottoms lifted into the air. I snorted.

‘Are you feeling alright, David?’ asked Mam.

‘Sounds like a cold coming on,’ said Da, winking at me.

‘Well, you’d better not be coughing and hacking all the way through the wedding,’ said Mam, ‘John Powell’s relatives will all be there. Mr and Mrs Powell,

her sister, her niece, the Russells...' The list went on and turned into a buzz that I couldn't really take in, a noise like those seagulls. 'They will all be there,' announced Mam, after a minute or so of names, 'all of them. So less noise from you, David Farley.'

'Yes, Mam. No coughing.' I tried to come across as serious, but I wasn't entirely sure if I'd done it. Looking at her face, neither had Mum, so she raised her eyebrows at me.

'Good,' she said.

We had just reached the turn-off to Northgate Street, where Da and I usually made our way out to the Dock, when I heard a familiar voice calling. 'Oh, Dave!' There was only one person in the world who I'd ever let call me Dave. I turned around to see Joe Davies, my best friend, running ahead of his frowning mother and beaming father.

'Hello Joe,' I said, as he approached, 'didn't expect to see you until we got to the chapel.'

'We're out a bit early. Dad wanted to feed the ducks.' Joe jabbed his thumb at his father. I'd always liked Mr Davies. He didn't seem to care what anyone thought about him. I gave him a wave and he waved back, crumbs of bread flying from the stale loaf in his hand. Joe's mum snatched it off him, and he grinned.

'Anna, don't you look lovely,' said Mrs Davies, trotting up to my sister with the bread still in her hand. She opened her arms in a friendly way, looked at the bread in one hand, and sighed before handing it back to her husband. She dusted her hands off, and put one on Anna's arm. 'Look at you, you're a woman. Doesn't she look lovely, Niall?'

Mr Davies grinned. 'Absolutely beautiful. That Powell boy's done well. He'd better take care of you.'

‘I’m sure John will do right by our Anna,’ said Mam, ‘he’s a lovely boy from a lovely family. Do you know Mr and Mrs Powell?’

‘Dockers, aren’t they?’ asked Mr Davies, still grinning. There was an uncomfortable moment of quiet.

‘That’s right, Niall. Bunch of Dock folk,’ said Da.

‘Oh well, you can’t have everything.’ Mr Davies hadn’t stopped smiling.

‘Niall.’ Mrs Davies didn’t raise her voice.

‘I think a lot of the thing about the Dock is the name,’ said Mr Davies.

‘The name? What do you mean?’ asked Mam.

‘Well, Pembroke Dock,’ said Mr Davies, ‘it’s hardly inviting, is it? A fair description, certainly – a town very close to Pembroke that has a busy dockyard – but it’s so cold. It used to be called Paterchurch, you know. Sounds far nicer.’ He’s always been such a funny man. It’s like he talks a different language. Mind, Mam’s always said me and Joe speak in our own language too, so maybe we’re all just different.

‘Did you want to finish that bread off with the ducks, Niall? We probably have time before the service, and we’re holding the Farleys up,’ said Mrs Davies.

‘Paterchurch sounds like a town that people live in, not just work in.’

‘Niall, let’s go and finish feeding the ducks.’ She hooked her arm around his and started to turn him around. ‘I’m looking forward to the wedding. You’re beautiful, Anna. A beautiful bride.’

‘You’re going to be brilliant. Don’t fall over like Mary at our wedding,’ said Mr Davies. His wife’s smile widened, but I didn’t think she was finding him very funny.

‘Come on Joe, you can speak to David later,’ she said.

‘Alright. See you later, Dave.’ Joe thumped me on the arm and winked. ‘Hey, some of those Powells might be girls,’ he added in a low voice.

‘Yes,’ I said, matching his tone, ‘girls from the Dock. Think about that.’

We grimaced in unison, and chuckled. ‘See you later,’ he said, and turned to race after his parents, who had gone back in the direction of the Mill Pond.

‘That Niall’s a funny man,’ said Da.

‘He’s very rude,’ said Mam.

‘Well, I think he’s funny,’ said Anna, ‘and maybe a bit simple. As if he doesn’t know what he’s saying.’

‘That’s no excuse,’ said Mam, ‘he was rude about the Powells.’

‘He didn’t know it, though. Besides, he was being rude about Pembroke Dock, if anything. Or its name,’ said Anna.

‘Well, you can’t judge someone for being from Pembroke Dock,’ said Mam, ‘that’s not fair.’

‘What about,’ I said, before thinking about it, ‘nothing, I mean. Sorry.’ I was remembering the boys from the Dock who’d started pushing Joe and I around a few weeks before. It hadn’t come to blows because of Big Rob at the bar. We would’ve shown them anyway, but they’d only started it because we were Pembroke boys.

‘Good. Nothing.’ Mam clapped her hands together. Da gave me a sideways glance. He was the only one I’d told about the fight. Or the nearly-fight, as it was. ‘Right, shall we try to get to the chapel on time?’

‘I think we’re still running early, love,’ said Da.

‘Best to be sure,’ muttered Anna. She started striding up the hill, towards the castle.

‘Nice to see someone’s keen,’ said Da, before Mam elbowed him in the ribs.

‘She was keen earlier,’ said Mam, ‘she just...didn’t know it.’

‘How can you not know you want to marry someone on the day you’re supposed to marry them? That’s silly,’ I said, keeping my voice low so that Anna wouldn’t hear me. Mam gave me a clip round the ear, something she had to reach up to do since I was taller than her. ‘Sorry.’

‘You will be if you say anything else like that.’ Mam began walking, quickly so she could catch up with Anna. ‘Wait for me, dear!’

‘You,’ said Da, seizing my arm, ‘need to watch what you say. You have to try harder. This is a big day. I don’t want to have to look after your mother as well as your sister if they’re both going to be...funny.’

I nodded and we walked without talking. There were more people on the streets now, older folk wandering to shops and walking dogs. The wind picked up and I shivered. My shirt collar felt even colder against my skin. Shouldn’t clothes keep you warm? ‘My shirt’s cold, Da.’

As if I’d reminded him to do it, Da pulled at his shirt collar. It wouldn’t budge from his thick neck. ‘Cold but smart. Doesn’t need to be warm anyway. That’s what your waistcoat’s for.’ He definitely didn’t believe what he was saying. In fact, he probably really wanted to go home and put on that green pullover he’d been wearing for the past month or so.

‘I suppose so. What about when people get married in summer?’ I asked.

‘Well, I imagine then, they probably just feel a bit hot. The waistcoat’s got to stay, it’s smart. Fine clothes, see, David.’

‘Do rich people have to wear smart clothes all the time?’

‘To be honest with you, David, I don’t know. I suppose whenever you see them, they’re dressed up as smart men. Like that accountant who came to talk with Griff the other week. He was wearing that stripy suit.’

‘If Griff owns the company, though,’ I said, ‘why doesn’t he ever wear smart clothes?’

‘Ah, well, Griff doesn’t like to think of himself that way. One of the boys, Griff is,’ said Dad, ‘and besides, Griff isn’t rich.’

‘But he owns the company.’

‘Yes, but you’ve got to look at it more widely. Griff has to run it, he has to pay you and me and everyone else...Griff makes money, but he’s got to hand a lot of it to other people again. He’s richer than us, yes, but not as rich as some other people. Like that accountant, or taxman. Whatever he was.’

‘Should he be that rich? From looking after other people’s money, I mean.’

‘It’s important, David. Someone smart has to do that.’ Da squinted at the castle, which Mam and Anna had managed to reach and were now standing, waiting for us. ‘Come on, pick up the pace. They’re waiting.’

Chapter Two

The Westgate Chapel was cold, too. 'Nice place, this,' said Da.

'It is.' I nodded. Mam and Anna had run off to one of the side rooms that the vicar had pointed out to them. 'Can I whisper something to you, Da?'

Da looked at the vicar, who was stacking hymnbooks on a small table by the lectern. He would occasionally open one, read it for a minute while moving his lips soundlessly, and close it again. 'Quickly,' he whispered, 'it's rude.'

'Mr Parsons is a bit...' I didn't want to sound rude. 'He's a bit odd, isn't he?' I winced, thinking I might have spoken out of turn.

'Well, he's a priest,' said Da, surprising me. 'I mean, that's not to say priests are always strange. It's just, they have to look at people differently. Means that sometimes you might think they're strange. It's just a part of doing God's work.'

'Can anyone do God's work?'

Da laughed throatily. 'You're beginning to sound like that Niall,' he said, still smiling. 'Thinking of becoming a priest, David?'

'I don't think I'm smart enough.'

'You might be odd enough.'

'Oh!' I said, and prodded Da in the stomach. He chuckled and put his hand around my shoulder, but immediately put it back to his side as Mr Parsons approached. The vicar was a tall man, and thin, with greying hair and a gentle voice like Granddad used to have. Quiet, with a rustle to it.

'Fathers and sons,' he said. I thought he'd go on from that, but he didn't. He patted me on the head even though I was almost as tall as him.

'Always important, fathers and sons,' said Da, sounding a bit like he didn't know what Mr Parsons was on about either.

‘Yes,’ I said, wanting to add to the conversation. ‘Da and I were just talking about becoming a vicar.’

‘Not both of you, surely?’ said Mr Parsons, surprising Da and I by laughing.

‘What David means,’ said Da, ‘is we were talking about how to become a vicar. Must take all sorts of brains.’ He prodded the top of his head.

‘I’ve always thought of it being in here.’ He put his hand on his chest. ‘That’s where love lives. Where God lives.’ He smiled sheepishly. ‘Must get back to my hymnbooks. But if you want to ask me anything else about the church, please do.’

‘Of course. You’re coming to the rugby club afterwards?’

‘Up the, ah, Upper Lamphey Road?’ he asked. Dad nodded. ‘I have another ceremony, but I’ll try to drop by later.’ He turned and went back to the lectern.

‘Of course,’ said Da, lowering his voice to a whisper again, ‘that’s another thing vicars get to do. Talk about love. The newer ones, anyway.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, my family used to go to St Mary’s when I was a boy,’ said Dad, ‘and you would never have heard the Reverend Simons talking about love. He was what you might call the old school, fire-and-brimstone.’

‘And Mr Parsons isn’t like that?’

‘No. If he was, we might all be better behaved.’ Da grinned. ‘But he does do very well. Never made a child cry, far as I know.’ He looked around. ‘Where are the Powells? I know we were a bit early, but they should be here now.’

‘Maybe they got held up.’

‘Obviously. I thought you were going to say something else about them being Dockers for a moment there.’ Da pulled at his shirt collar again, looked around to make sure there were no Dockers in the room, and said, lowering his voice again, ‘You’re sure none of those boys in the pub were Powells?’

'I think so. I mean, I don't know all the Powells.' I shrugged.

'Well, if one of them turns up here as a Powell or one of their friends or something, then don't start anything. Please. I'm sure they wouldn't.'

I thought about saying you couldn't trust a Docker, but I knew Da would tell me off whether he agreed or not. 'Don't worry, Da. I'll be good for Anna.' Those Dockers had been big lads too.

'Hello?' A small woman had walked into the chapel.

'Mrs Powell,' said Da, 'how lovely to see you again. We...' I wondered if he was going to say something about them being late. 'We have been looking forward to seeing you.'

'Mr Farley. Fine day for it,' said Mr Powell, who hadn't been far behind his wife. He was a little barrel-chested bald man. 'Very happy to have got to today. Proud moment.'

'Is young John with you?' asked Da.

'He's just smoking outside with our Francis. My sister and her family should be here soon, too,' said Mrs Farley. 'We'll fill this room today.'

'With any luck,' said Da. 'Why don't you go and see Anna and Grace? I think they're through that door over there...' Dad pointed off to the left. 'The vicar probably knows better.'

'Oh yes, we'd better greet Mr Parsons. Come along, William.' Mrs Powell took her husband's hand and pulled him along. She was very strong, I thought, to pull a beefy man like him with her. He nodded at us again.

'We'll talk again in a moment,' he said, before being dragged up the aisle.

'They're certainly odd enough to get on with our family,' whispered Da. 'Maybe we just collect strange people. Look at the Davies family.'

‘Perhaps it’s because of where we live,’ I said. ‘You grow up here and you turn out all funny.’

‘That’s daft. But it might make sense.’ Da winked.

‘You boys seen my Ma and Da?’ John Powell had come in. He was a bit barrel-chested too, like his father, but his face was a bit more pleasant – less of a scowl about it.

‘You’ve just missed them,’ said Da, offering his hand. ‘How are you feeling, Mr Powell?’

He took it. ‘Great, thank you,’ said John, before adding ‘Mr Farley. How are you feeling?’ Their hands were still clasped together. Both of their knuckles looked white.

‘Nervous,’ said Da, before letting go, ‘but fine, really. You’re a good lad, John Powell.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ John grinned. ‘How are you, David?’ He offered his hand.

‘I’m fine too, thank you, Mr Powell.’ I took the hand, but the extra strong handshake must have just been for Da – all I got was a firm one.

‘You can call me John,’ he said, ‘seeing as we’ll be brothers by the end of the day. You can call me John too, sir.’ He grinned again at Da. He can’t have been half as nervous as Anna.

‘If we’re doing that, you need to stop calling me sir.’ Da returned the smile. ‘No sirs in this family.’

‘Oh, speaking of family,’ began John, before wandering to the door and opening it. He put his head out and barked. ‘Oh, Francis! Come and say hello. Bring Rachel.’

A boy about my age who looked like a skinny John came in, with his hands in his pockets. He looked like he didn’t like his fine clothes, either. ‘A’right?’ he said.

‘Take your hands out of your pockets, Francis.’ John put a hand on his younger brother’s shoulder and squeezed a little.

‘A’right,’ said Francis, irritably. He squirmed out of John’s grip and held his hand out to Dad. ‘A’right?’ We’d still not managed to meet the younger Powell brother. I thought he had too many teeth – very yellow teeth at that.

‘Nice to meet you, Francis. Sorry you were ill when we came over for supper,’ said Da.

Francis shrugged. ‘It’s a’right.’

‘Heaven’s sake, Francis, say something that isn’t “a’right”,’ said John.

‘Sorry,’ said Francis, to Da and not to John, ‘got a bit of a headache. Feeling ill.’ He turned to me. ‘A’right? You the brother?’ I saw John rolling his eyes and Da smirking.

‘Yes. David.’ We shook hands.

‘Francis.’

‘He knows that,’ said John.

‘A’right,’ said Francis. When I was little, I’d wanted a brother instead of a sister. I thought it would be more fun. Looking at these two, I wasn’t so sure.

‘Where’s Rachel? Thought you was looking after her,’ said John. He put his hand on Francis’ shoulder again.

‘She’s outside,’ said Francis, wriggling away.

‘I said bring her. Needs to meet her new family.’

Francis sighed loudly and wrenched the door open. He was only a bit taller than me, but I reckoned I could take him in a fight. He’d get exhausted from huffing and puffing easily. ‘Rachel, John says you have to come in and meet some people,’ he called. ‘Says it’s important!’

‘I didn’t say she had to,’ said John, who looked flustered for the first time since he’d come into the chapel.

‘Yes you did,’ said Francis, ‘that’s exactly what you said.’

‘Not like that, though,’ said John, ‘not like an order. She’s going to be nervous now.’

‘She’s a girl. They’re always nervous.’ As he was saying this, a good-looking girl came in. I’d expected her to be younger, but she was about the same age as me, or maybe a little younger. Fifteen or sixteen. I felt as nervous as everyone else seemed to be for the first time that day. I’d always thought I was OK around pretty girls, but looking at her I felt, well, stupid. ‘Isn’t that right, cousin?’

‘Stop it, Francis,’ she said.

‘You didn’t even hear what I said.’

‘I’m not always nervous. I heard you say I am as I came in. I’m not deaf.’

‘Very nice to meet you,’ said Da, reaching across Francis to shake Rachel’s hand, ‘I’m Llewellyn. You can call me Llew.’

‘I’m Rachel,’ she said, ‘I’m not nervous.’

‘So I’ve gathered,’ said Da. ‘This is my son, David.’

‘Nice to meet you, David.’ I felt like I did when that Sophie was working in the shop on Saturday mornings, a bit, except talking was harder.

I held my hand out, not quite sure whether this was the right thing to do. But it was there now, so she took it. ‘Really good to meet you too,’ I said. ‘You’re John’s cousin?’

‘And Francis,’ she said, jabbing her thumb at him and wincing, ‘sadly.’

Francis snorted. ‘She loves me really.’

‘Just like me,’ said John. ‘Family, so you’ve got to!’

Da snorted as he tried to stifle his laughter, probably thinking what I was. These Dockers weren't too bad. I mean, they couldn't all be like the ones from the near-fight in the pub, but still...that Rachel was very pretty. Bit of a mouth on her, but that's alright, really. 'Well, it's good to meet you both. Rachel, are your parents coming along too?'

'Yes, they said sorry, they're running late.'

'They're not,' said Da, 'it's just the rest of us are early.'

I laughed, but no-one else did. Francis raised an eyebrow and looked me up and down. 'You alright, David?'

Da put his arm around me. 'David's fine. He's just anxious about his sister. Protective boy, see.'

'Well, you have nothing to worry about,' said John, 'I'll be taking good care of her.'

'If she ever needs someone in our family to talk to about real things,' said Rachel, 'she can always come to me too.'

'Thank you,' I said, 'very much.' There was a moment's silence.

'I fancy a bit of air,' said Da, coughing. I felt his big hand on my back. 'Fancy that, David?'

'Yes,' I said, 'yes, definitely.'

'Come to think of it, I could go for some myself. John, the vicar's over there doing something with hymn books.'

'Thank you, Mr Farley.'

Da waved his hand. 'You can call me Llew, too.' He turned to the younger Powell brother. 'And you, Francis.'

'Thanks, Llew,' said Francis, smiling. His teeth were not good for that. Ghoulis-looking, they were.

‘Right, fresh air. Come on, David.’

‘Yes,’ I said again. ‘Fresh air would be nice.’

Rachel giggled. I felt my face warming as Da stepped in front of me to usher me out of the door. ‘You’ll be fine, David,’ said John, sounding a little worried, ‘you have nothing to worry about.’

I took a deep breath of the early November air. ‘I think you were a bit odd coming out of the church just then, Da. Awkward.’

‘You started it,’ said Da, ‘and it’s a chapel.’

‘It looks like a church,’ I said, leaning against the railings to look up at the building.

‘It’s a chapel,’ said Da, ‘your grandfather helped build it. Was there when Reverend Evans said the first prayer.’

‘Was Reverend Evans the first vicar?’

‘First vicar. Methodist chapel.’

‘I thought reverends were vicars.’

Da scratched his chin and took his pipe out. ‘I think they can be either. Vicars, reverends, priests. You’d probably be better off asking Mr Parsons later. I’m an engineer, not a holy man.’ He tapped his pipe out on the railings, the old tobacco puffing out like a little storm cloud. Then he carefully pinched some fresh tobacco from his case and packed it into the bowl.

‘Can I have a smoke of your pipe, Da?’

‘When you’re older, David.’

‘I’m seventeen. Come on.’ I opened my hand. ‘I’ve smoked cigarettes lots. Down the pub, with Joe.’

‘Oh, really?’ Da raised his eyebrows. ‘Joe’s parents know about that, then?’

‘No,’ I said, lowering my hand. His Mum would have such a go about it.

‘Well, as you’re so nervous, go on then,’ said Da. ‘Just let me get it going.’ He took out a match and lit it, shielding his hand from the slight breeze, puffing in and out. He gave it a few longer drags, and held it out to me. ‘Don’t breathe in too hard, or you’ll burn yourself. In here.’ He patted his chest.

‘Got it,’ I said, sucking it hard. My eyes watered, but I just about stopped the cough that tickled its way up my throat. ‘Really...’ The words wouldn’t come out. I gulped. ‘Really like this, Da. Good tobacco.’

‘I prefer it to cigarettes. Some don’t. It’s not for everyone.’

I sucked in another big mouthful. ‘It’s...’ The words were stuck in my throat again. I swallowed. ‘It’s definitely for me.’

‘You sure it’s calming those nerves?’

‘What nerves?’

‘That’s the spirit, David.’

‘No, really. I think Anna’s going to be all right with that John. He seems like a good boy, for a-’

‘Yes, he does,’ said Da. ‘You sure you’re not nervous, son? When that Rachel came in you went all funny.’

‘Just that Francis. He’s annoying, seems a bit of a-’

‘If you say so,’ said Da, winking. ‘Wouldn’t it be funny if you married Rachel? We’d be even closer to the Powells. Big family.’ He held his hand out. ‘That’s enough pipe for you. You’ll be coughing all through the ceremony.’

‘Mam did say she wouldn’t be happy about that,’ I said. ‘Coughing, I mean. Anyway, what do you mean, marry Rachel? Don’t be daft, Da.’ There were loads of

other girls I'd thought about, anyway. Sophie from the shop, that Ellie from a couple of doors down...plenty out there, looking for a good, hard-working man like myself.

'Why not? She's very pretty. You could do a lot worse.' He shrugged.

'I haven't got the time for courting though,' I said, 'I've got my work at the yard and I go to the pub with Joe when I'm not doing that. Can't imagine not working and going with Joe. It's what we do. We have too much fun not to.'

'When I married your mother, I was doing exactly that. Working at the yard down the docks – for Griff's dad, mind, not Griff – and going to the pub. But I met her when she was working in the shop – you know, your grandparents' place – and before I knew it I'd fallen for her. I went all funny like you did in there.'

'Still being daft, Da.' I shook my head. 'You just don't understand being young.'

'I don't think I'm the one being daft here, David.' He winked and tried to take a puff on his pipe. 'Oh, the bloody thing's gone out while I was talking.'

'Serves you right. You shouldn't be saying "bloody" by the church, either.'

'It's a chapel. Besides, we're not inside, so it's fine. Although, we'd better head in. The guests'll be here soon.'

I'd wanted to stay asleep in bed that morning, but it didn't compare to how I felt sat in the chapel. It was like normal church, but it felt like it was longer and slower. Mr Parsons asked us to sing, and kept talking about God, and all I could think about was how boring love must be, if this is how getting married starts. I glanced across at Francis and Rachel as John said his vows. Francis looked like he was nodding off, absent-mindedly scratching his knee, as if to keep awake. Rachel was sat bolt upright, watching the ceremony carefully.

I dared to glance at Mam beside me, who had tears in her eyes. I suppose she's a girl too, I thought. Next to her, Da looked like he was going to cry too. The

sun had come through the window during one of the hymns. I wiped my eyes, even though they were dry, and Mam grasped my hand. I didn't think she'd held my hand since I started school. Even then, I'd always pulled my fingers away.

I smiled up at her, but she was still looking at Anna, so I looked over at Rachel again. Our eyes met. I realized I hadn't stopped smiling, so I frowned and looked at my feet. 'It's hard to watch for me too,' said Mam, whispering into my ear. 'She's a grown woman now. Oh David, do keep your eyes open. I know it's so hard.'

I raised my head to look at Anna again, then tried to catch another glimpse of Rachel in the corner of my vision. She was looking at the front again, but with a faint grin on her face. My cheeks burned.

Chapter Three

Back at home, I rushed upstairs to my room. 'Where are you going, David?' asked Mam as we entered the house.

'I've just got to check something,' I said, without looking back. When I reached the top of the stairs, I pushed open the door to my room and jumped on my bed, spreading my arms out. I took a deep breath, before going back to the bowl of water on the side table. I dipped my index finger in to check the temperature. Lovely and cold. I undid my tie and collar and carefully lowered my right hand into the water.

I held my cool, wet hand to the skin on my neck, so raw after being pressed up against that starched collar. Why did they make them so stiff and raw? I took another deep breath, before I heard Da calling. 'David! Are you giving us a hand taking these boxes up the club?'

The answer was definitely yes, as I'd been told the day before, so I dried my neck with a towel and called back. 'I'll be down in a moment!' The collar felt even stiffer as I attempted to do it up again. I re-tied the tie, not quite getting it as neat as before, but near enough, and left the room.

'Have you been taking your clothes off up there?' said Da, immediately raising a finger to my tie.

'Not now, Llew,' said Mam, grabbing the knot and wiggling it into a better position, 'David's still a boy. You're embarrassing him.'

I'm a man, not "still a boy", I thought, but having Mam on my side meant not talking back to her. 'I was just loosening my tie a bit,' I said, 'why would I be taking my clothes off? I'm not Granddad.'

'David, don't talk about Granddad like that,' said Mam.

'To be fair, my father does probably deserve to be spoken of like that,' said Da. 'At Jill's christening, too.'

‘My neck was just a bit sore,’ I said, changing the subject. I didn’t really want to talk about Granddad’s incident again really. Funny as anything, but it made me feel a bit sad when he started crying later. He was such a big man. It looked wrong and I couldn’t quite tell you why.

‘The things we do for family,’ said Da, tugging at his own collar, before nervously looking at Mam. She smiled back. ‘I mean...you know what I mean.’

‘Oh, it’s just that neither of you are used to it,’ said Mam. ‘Should have you both dressed up in finery all the time.’

‘We’re not bank people, Mam,’ I said. How could anyone wear such uncomfortable clothes every day? They’d have so much starch on them that eventually they wouldn’t be able to wash it off. Then they’d just be stiff all the time.

‘I was joking, David.’ She pointed to several boxes on the table. ‘Now, Mr Powell and Francis took a couple of these while you were upstairs, so there’s not as many now. Take three and let’s make a move.’

The boxes, full of sandwiches and cakes for the party, weren’t heavy or awkward-sized, so I piled up four of them and took them off the table. ‘Don’t crush them now,’ said Da.

‘I won’t.’

‘Right. Ready for a walk?’ Mam led the way, carrying a couple of boxes herself, to the front door before Da or I could respond.

‘I’m just ready to eat,’ said Da, ‘that’s the worst of it. Even when we get there, your mother wants to wait for enough people to arrive before we can start.’

‘Aren’t you full from eating the last egg?’ I nudged his side with my elbow.

‘Careful, son. I don’t want to drop my boxes either.’ He pushed in front of me and followed Mam.

Outside, the sky still looked like early morning, even though it must have been heading towards noon. It was as if no time had passed at all, as if the wedding

hadn't happened. 'Are we meeting Anna up at the club?' I said, jogging slightly to catch up with Da.

'Of course. John did offer to give us a hand carrying these, but I sent him on with her. Took some doing – I think he would have taken all these boxes if I'd asked. He's a good man.'

'I'm glad you think so,' said Mam, 'he's family now.' It must have got a bit lighter out, because I could see the grey in her hair.

'Family,' said Da, nodding. We were heading in the opposite direction of the chapel now, up the other end of town and beyond the shops. We came off Eastback and re-joined Main Street. A good solid five minutes of quiet time, lovely. Up past the Crossed Swords, past some big houses. A maid looked out of one house – number one hundred and six. To think people had servants a few minutes walk from ours. Come to think of it, between ours and one hundred and six, the old workhouse stood. No distance at all, from fine clothes to people with no teeth.

'Do I have to think of Francis like a brother now too?' I said. I couldn't keep the disappointment out of my voice.

'David!' said Mam. 'You've only just met him.'

'Well...no, your mother's right,' said Da, winking at me. 'the two of you might be best friends.'

'I'll let you know.' Francis didn't look like he'd want to be anyone's best friend.

'That Rachel seems nice,' said Mam. 'Maybe you'd rather be friendly with her.'

'Mam! Not you too. I had Da going on about this earlier.'

'I just mean you could do with being friends with her. Honestly David, you mustn't jump to conclusions.' Then she winked too. I could have sworn I'd only seen her do that two or three times before in my entire life.

‘What are they building there?’ said Da, who had apparently stopped listening to us to crane his neck at a small building site across the road. ‘There’s a sign.’ He went to cross the road.

‘Llew, we haven’t got time for this. You can have a look later.’ Mam sidestepped Da, blocking his passage, with surprising agility.

‘Fine,’ he said, ‘I’ll take a look later.’ He stopped to squint at the site again. ‘They’ve got a fair bit of corrugated iron over there.’

‘What sandwiches did you do, Mam?’

‘We’ve got cheese, tomato, and beef and mustard.’

‘Beef?’ The hunger I didn’t think would affect me rumbled in my stomach.

‘Yes, the Russells sent it over. Mr Russell’s a butcher. Fine business to be in,’ said Mam. She kept talking about the Russells for a bit, but I’d stopped listening. I was thinking about the beef, and the mustard it was going to come with. How strong did Mam make the mustard? I started to remember a few years before, when Joe and I had got hold of the tin of mustard powder and made an egg-cup full of mustard that was almost entirely powder. He’d dared me to eat a whole spoonful and I’d steered clear of it since.

‘I think their son’s about your age, so there’s going to be a few people you can talk to,’ said Mam. ‘David? Are you listening?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘lots of people to talk to. I’m looking forward to it. When are they going to start arriving?’

‘About three o’clock.’

‘I thought it was half past two,’ said Da, sounding a bit disappointed.

‘No, it’s definitely three. I’ll show you one of the invitations when we get there.’

The houses were fewer and it seemed to be greener around the road now. The buildings we did pass were larger than those in town, bigger even than one hundred and six, and further apart from each other. Da pointed at one. 'Look at that,' he said, 'the size of that. What would you do inside a house like that all day?'

I honestly had no idea what I'd do in a house that size all day. 'It would be nice to have the room though,' said Mam. 'Just a little extra room.'

'That's not just a little extra though, is it?' said Da. 'We'd have to have our fathers come and live with us, just to make up for having all that space. Mad.'

'It would be nice though,' said Mam.

'Yes, it would,' I said. Da looked surprised. I felt surprised. 'I mean, what if one day you needed the rooms?'

'What for?' said Da.

'For...larger families.' The looks on their faces made me wish I hadn't said it. I tried to think about other ways such a big house could be useful. 'Or you could have loads of animals, like a farm inside.' It felt daft already.

'Ah, you'll learn,' said Da, smiling. We kept walking in silence for a little while, until we came to the rugby club. There was a soupy mist hanging about now, creeping into my nose and making the grass glisten.

'Another church,' I said, looking across the road from the rugby club. I'd known it was there – I'd been up to the club before, loads – but I hadn't really noticed it until now. 'We have so many churches in Pembroke.'

'I'm not altogether sure this counts as Pembroke anymore, we're so far out,' said Da, 'but if you like, yes. Big old things, they'll outlive me and they'll outlive you.'

'Llew!' said Mam.

'You know what I mean. People will keep believing in things, and people will keep building real things out of it. The way they do it will change...but people will keep believing.' Da shrugged. 'Better get these sandwiches inside.' He and Mam

went in, but I stayed out, my eyes still on the church. This one had a graveyard. I wanted to go and read the names on the stones. I'd always enjoyed doing that, especially if I found another Farley. Sounds silly, but it was nice to know there were more of us out there, even in different times.

'Give me those,' said Da, 'and stop daydreaming. We need a hand in there.' I hadn't even noticed he'd come back outside. Mam followed him.

'Pop David's boxes on the table with the rest, Llew. I'll be back in a minute.'

'See you in there,' said Da, taking the boxes out of my hands from me. I expected Mam to tell me it was time I pulled my weight or something like that, but instead she hugged me.

'You were so well behaved,' she said, 'my grown-up son, worrying about his sister. Your father said you were a little off at first, but I knew you'd do us proud.' She let go of me. 'Is Joe coming a bit early?'

'I thought I'd invite him,' I said, 'as he's like family, you know?' And because carrying tables and chairs and food would be far more fun with my best friend, as daft as he was. Always a laugh.

'Good, he can keep you company while we arrange everything.' She hugged me again, kissed me on the cheek, and walked into the club, leaving me out on the playing field.

Of course, Joe was late. He'd probably only made it to the church on time because his parents – especially his mum – were with him. He had a habit of wandering off, and you'd find him ages later looking at trees or watching a bee buzzing from flower to flower.

Not that there are going to be any bees about today, I thought. I shivered in the wind and the moist air, the grass and mud under my shoes not quite squelchy, but getting there. Sort of like standing on cake.

'All right, Dave?' He was striding slowly towards me, his hands in his pockets. Joe had managed to make his good suit look like clothing he wore every day. He held

himself without the stiffness of the suit, like he'd slept in it. The fine clothes just didn't sit so strange on him.

'You're late,' I said. 'I've been waiting for you.'

'Have you got a watch?'

'No.'

'Well, how do you know I'm late then?' Joe shook my hand vigorously.

'All right, don't get smart,' I said, then laughed. 'You're pretty happy then?'

'Well, it's been a nice day. Fed the ducks, went to a wedding, and we're going to have a bit of a dance tonight.' He did a funny little twist as he said 'dance'.

'Weather could be better.' I held my hand out open against the spattering rain.

'Nah,' said Joe, 'Just a bit of drizzle. Mist sitting on the ground, if anything.'

'What did I say about being smart?' But I couldn't help smiling. Joe was like that, he passed on his good mood. 'Nice to see you, though. Sorry we didn't get to talk much at the church.'

'Isn't that one a chapel?' said Joe.

'Chapel. Meant to say chapel.' I shrugged. 'Does it matter that much?'

'It does if you're a priest. What are people going to call you? A vicar or a reverend?'

'Vicar's easiest, I reckon.' I slapped Joe on the arm. 'Did you talk to any of the Powells? They're all right.'

'Saw John's brother and sister. About our age, aren't they?'

'John's brother and cousin,' I said, correcting him. 'Rachel is his cousin.'

'She's pretty,' said Joe. 'Guess you can grow a flower in a swamp.'

‘What do you mean?’ I scratched my head.

‘She’s good-looking, for a Dock girl.’ Joe frowned. ‘I saw one of the boys from the pub on the Powell side of the church, too.’

‘You mean the chapel,’ I said, trying to get one back after his smart flower thing. ‘What do you mean? Which boy from the pub?’

‘No, I mean, one of the boys. From the pub.’ He clenched his fists and mimed boxing an opponent. ‘That time. When Big Rob sorted it out for us. Saved us from getting a pasting.’

‘We weren’t going to get a pasting,’ I said, waving my hand lazily to one side, before realising exactly what Joe was saying. ‘Wait, what? From the time where they pushed you?’

‘From the time when they pushed us, yes.’

‘No, it was just you. I was about to hit him when Big Rob stepped in.’ I thought that was what had happened. I knew Joe definitely got pushed.

‘Well, whether or not it was both of us who got shoved, it doesn’t matter,’ said Joe. ‘There was a big gang of them, remember?’

‘About four,’ I said, shrugging.

‘Four of them who were all bigger than us. That’s a big gang,’ said Joe. ‘Anyway, one of them was this ginger boy. Well, I saw him sat with a fat ginger man with a beard and a woman who was just as fat. But she didn’t have a beard. Obviously.’ Joe didn’t sound too calm.

‘You’re seeing things,’ I said, giving him a little shove, ‘because you’re scared those boys will want another go. But honestly, it’s not worth bothering with. It wasn’t him.’

‘It bloody was. You just didn’t see him because you’ve had plenty of other stuff to think about.’ He held his hand up. ‘Obviously, that’s fine. Just thought I’d get a bit of a warning in.’

‘Nothing to worry about, I’m telling you.’ But Joe had got me thinking about the ginger boy. I remembered a dinner table conversation about a family related to the Powells who were all red-headed. The Russells, I thought they were called.

‘You don’t remember the boy’s name, do you?’ I asked Joe.

‘Haven’t a clue,’ said Joe, turning to look down the road, ‘wasn’t much time for conversation.’ His face brightened up again. ‘Have you heard about the new church?’

‘The chapel?’

‘No Dave, the new church. On Station Road. You must have walked past it on the way up here, or the site for it.’ He held his arms wide open. ‘Great big thing made of metal. That’s great, isn’t it?’

‘Never mind your metal church, Joe, this is serious. My sister just married into a family of rough boys.’

‘Did the ginger boy actually push either of us?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, not all of them pushed us.’ Joe shrugged. ‘I mean, we’d have gone right over.’

‘Maybe not,’ I said. ‘I think it was the big one. What’s his name?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Joe, ‘like I said, there wasn’t much time for conversation.’

‘Weren’t they calling him something? Harry, wasn’t it?’ I’d remembered more about it now. The ginger boy had definitely been there saying ‘shove him, Harry’.

‘I was too scared to notice.’ Joe looked at his feet, raising one from the mud, wetter again now, with a squelch.

‘I wasn’t.’ I pulled my shoulders back and my chin up.

‘That’s daft.’

‘If you think it’s daft, why did you bring it up?’

‘Because it might be worth looking out for the ginger boy later. In case he tries anything.’

‘What, so the two of us can take him together?’ I said, putting my fists up.

‘No, so we can make sure we have other people around, like our dads.’ He slapped my hands down gently.

I sighed, then turned and walked to the road. I looked down it, squinting to see where this metal church was supposed to be. Must have been what Da was on about on the way up here. ‘Fair enough. He’d best not try anything though. I’ll have my whole family down on him, and you and yours. We’ll take them, easy.’

Joe joined me by the side of the road. ‘Well, nothing should come of it. It’s a big day for your family and for John Powell’s. He’s not going to want a big fight starting on his wedding day.’

John did seem pretty decent. His family was all right too, aside maybe from that Francis. ‘Suppose not. Here, tell us about your metal church.’

Gareth was sipping at a half of beer when we eventually went in, leaning on the piano. He didn’t have to wear a fine suit, but then I wasn’t sure he owned one. We knew Gareth from down the pub, and my parents had asked him to play the piano with some other musicians he knew. Sort of a last minute band. Better that way – when the music comes from a voice and a piano and a fiddle or two. Always quite liked the idea of playing myself, but there just wasn’t any time for it. Not sure if I had that musical ear, either.

‘Having your usual, Gareth?’ asked Joe.

Gareth tapped the side of his nose. ‘Got to stay sharp, boys. That’s the trick to the old beer.’ He chuckled, and coughed wetly. He finished with a snort, and raised his glass again. ‘Got to stay sharp.’

‘Cheers,’ I said. ‘Come on, Joe. Let’s get a beer.’

‘Gareth staying sharp then,’ said Joe, sniggering. ‘He’s always very sharp, isn’t he?’

‘Sharp as a pin,’ I said as we crossed the wide room. ‘Do you ever wonder what he means?’ Gareth had always drunk half-pints and always told anyone who’d listen the same reason why – he was ‘staying sharp’.

‘I think he thinks he’s not going to get drunk if he only drinks half pints. You know...it’s half the size, so he can drink twice as many.’

I laughed. ‘We’ve seen him drunk a lot.’

‘Ah,’ said Joe, tapping the side of his nose, as Gareth liked to, ‘but he doesn’t know he’s drunk. Because he’s convinced that he’s managed to...stay sharp. He must have believed himself sober for years.’ He glanced across the room. The sandwiches had all been unpacked and Mum now seemed to be counting them. ‘Plenty of sandwiches, eh?’

‘Beef sandwiches,’ I said, patting Joe on the arm as we reached the bar. ‘Hopefully not with too much mustard.’

‘I always like plenty of mustard.’

‘You like it too strong, Joe. I don’t understand it.’ I caught the eye of the bald bloke behind the bar. ‘Could we have a couple of pints of bitter?’

‘Please,’ added Joe.

‘Certainly,’ said the bald man. We paid him and sat on a little table. All the tables were near the wall, for the dancing later.

Joe looked at the open space. ‘Dancing then. Girls and dancing.’ He sipped his bitter, looking lost in thought.

‘I like girls,’ I said, keeping my voice low, ‘but not dancing. Do you think anyone likes dancing?’

‘Girls do,’ said Joe, ‘it’s like their test.’ He did a funny little twist again, but with a thrust of his hips too.

‘Their test?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘to see if we’re real men. If we’re willing to make fools of ourselves right in front of them, or even while holding onto them...’ He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. ‘Well, then we’re worthy.’

‘It’s not about being worthy,’ I said. Joe was my best friend, but he was clueless when it came to girls. ‘You’ve got to show them you’re a man.’

‘That’s what I mean. You show them you’re a man by not being like the other men.’ Joe held his palms out flat. ‘That you’re willing to look like a fool...that you’re different.’

‘That just sounds silly. Why would they want anyone just because they were different?’

‘Why want someone because they’re the same as everyone else?’

I decided to let it go. I thought Joe was probably talking about himself. He wasn’t very good with girls because he was, as Mum liked to say, ‘sort of odd’. ‘Maybe we should talk to the Powells,’ I said, nodding at Francis from across the room.

‘You can introduce me to that Rachel.’ Joe elbowed me in the ribs.

‘Oi!’ I said, elbowing him back. He tried to block me and we bashed our elbows together.

‘You almost sound keen,’ said Joe, rubbing his elbow.

‘Don’t be daft. I only meant because they’re family now. Shouldn’t be rude.’

‘What’s Francis like? He looks like an otter.’

‘You mean a weasel,’ I said.

‘I was trying to be nice,’ said Joe, ‘otters are better than weasels. Did you get the chance to talk to him earlier?’

‘Little bit,’ I said, ‘he was hung-over.’

‘Sounds like we might get on all right then.’ We bashed elbows again, more gently this time, and laughed. ‘Only joking. It’s not all about beer.’

‘It’s a laugh, though.’

‘Unless you’re Gareth.’ Joe raised his glass at Gareth, still hunched over the piano. His half-pint was full again, even though he hadn’t gone up to the bar. Someone must have got it for him. ‘Staying sharp over there. I think it’s all that’s holding him together.’

‘He’s happy though.’

Joe sipped his drink, then brought it up to his eyes. ‘Do you think he can tell if he’s happy or not?’

‘You’re all up and down today, Joe. It’s not even your sister getting married!’

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I’m just trying to get on your good side so we can talk to that Rachel.’

‘She’s not that pretty,’ I said, ‘her nose is too big.’

‘You sound like you’ve had a good look to make sure, though.’

‘Hey...’ A stout shadow fell across the table. I looked up to see Joe’s dad beaming at us, his hands in his pockets. His suit was all creased.

‘Hello Dad,’ said Joe, ‘I think you’re early.’

‘Better early than never,’ said Mr Davies, offering his hand out to me. I took it and he shook it with energy. ‘How’s the family holding up? Families, I should say.’

‘We’re all fine thank you, Mr Davies. Us and the Powells.’ I looked at my hand, which Mr Davies was still shaking.

'I say families, I should say family. Now that you're all joined up.' Mr Davies let go of my hand.

'You did say family, Dad,' said Joe. 'Then you changed it. You said family first.'

'Family first, that sounds about right.' Mr Davies turned and waved at Gareth. 'Staying sharp?'

Gareth cackled back, odd hissing noises escaping the gaps between his teeth. 'Dad,' said Joe in a low voice, 'how old is he?'

'How old does he look, Joseph?' Joe's dad was the only one to ever call him Joseph.

'Between...fifty...'

'...and ninety,' I said.

'I've always thought it was down to the light you saw him in,' said Mr Davies. 'Some days, he looked about forty. Or nights, I should say. Stood in the Royal Oak with his back straight, staring down boys half his age, telling jokes or throwing a punch. Then you see him in the afternoons, an old man. Seeming to rustle as he moves.'

'You sound like you've known him a while,' I said.

'He sounds like he's been around a while,' said Joe.

Mr Davies frowned. 'I feel like he has been. Feels like he's been around at least since I started going to the pub. Of course, I could be thinking of some other pub-man. They tend to just replace each other as the years go by. Pass on to new drinkers and storytellers.' He turned to amble over to Gareth, and I noticed Joe's mam frowning from across the room.

'Dad's getting himself in trouble, again,' said Joe, who had noticed the same thing.

'Do they argue a lot, your parents?'

‘Not as much as you’d think. At home, Mum’s fine with Dad. She even seems to like his...odd ways. I just don’t think she likes the idea of other people seeing them.’

‘She doesn’t like sharing it?’ I was trying to be polite.

‘I think she’s embarrassed by it.’ Joe smiled, so I nearly asked him if he was too, but managed to stop myself. ‘We are still sat across the room from those Powells,’ said Joe. The smile hadn’t left his face, and he looked a lot like his father.

‘Do you think we should talk to them? I thought you were worried about big ginger cousins.’ I managed to get the full elbow into Joe’s ribs now, making him gasp. ‘Wasn’t even that hard,’ I said, clapping him on the shoulder.

‘I was distracted,’ said Joe, coughing slightly.

‘I suppose, if they’re distracting you so much,’ I said, ‘we should go and talk to them. Francis might be all right, I suppose.’

‘If he’s recovered a bit. Rachel seems like a nice girl too.’

‘You haven’t met her yet.’

‘Sometimes you can tell though.’ Joe looked like Mr Davies again. ‘You know, just by looking. If a girl’s nice, I mean.’ He frowned. ‘Actually, no, that’s not how-’

‘She’s probably got some big ugly Docker boyfriend. All muscles and red knuckles.’ I patted Joe on the arm. ‘No chance there for you.’

‘Now you’ve made it sound like a challenge,’ said Joe. ‘Come on, let’s go and talk with Francis. He might want to make friends.’

Chapter Four

'I think it's fascinating,' said Mr Davies, 'that the number changes every time.'

'Have you ever tried it?' asked Mr Parsons, raising his half-pint to his mouth.

'It doesn't sound true. If there's that many steps, it must be easy to lose count,' said Francis. He hadn't had a drink yet, but he'd started looking over to the bar with his little wet eyes.

'Dad,' said Joe, 'does anyone know why everyone counts the steps differently?'

'Well, that's open to interpretation, Joseph. I've always thought it was something to do with how people look at faith in different ways,' said Mr Davies.

I yawned, then quickly covered my mouth. Francis just yawned. Mr Davies had come to talk to us about St Govan's chapel, out on the cliffs, and had invited the pastor to join in as soon as he'd arrived. 'You're writing your book about this then, Mr Davies?' I asked.

'Might be a book, might just be a story. It's a hobby, really. Not even mine originally – my grandfather started it, after stories his mother told him.'

'All very interesting, St Govan,' said Mr Parsons. 'Of course, the chapel is the site of an actual miracle. Or so they say.' He looked over both of his shoulders, as if he'd something he shouldn't have.

'What miracle?' said Francis. 'Water's a bit choppy by the cliffs to go walking on.' He laughed.

'There's a large stone, by the chapel,' said Mr Parsons, 'that, at one time, was a silver bell that Govan used when he was the priest there, to call people to worship. Pirates stole it a number of times, so a host of angels descended and turned it to stone.'

'That hardly sounds useful.'

‘Well,’ said the vicar, ‘when Govan hit the rock, it still made the sound of the bell. That’s the beauty of it. They say that when the waves hit that rock now, on some days, you can still hear the sound of a bell ringing.’ He looked excited. ‘I mean, that’s the story. In a nutshell. Different folks have different ways of telling it. And nobody seems to know or agree on which stone is the stone bell itself.’

Francis frowned. ‘Interesting. I’m going to get a drink.’ He turned and sloped off to the bar.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Davies, who didn’t seem to have noticed Francis leaving, ‘they do also say that the sound of a bell ringing isn’t all you might hear when the winds are raging down there.’ Mr Parsons looked over his shoulder again. I decided to join Francis at the bar, promising to return in a moment.

The bald man had just put a half-pint down in front of him. ‘Everyone’s staying sharp today,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ I said, looking at Gareth. I hadn’t seen him move from his place by the piano, but his glass still seemed full. I was sure I’d seen him sipping from it. ‘What do you think of Niall – Mr Davies’ – stories? Well, him and Mr Parsons.’

‘I can’t tell if they’re both trying to wind each other up,’ said Francis. ‘I bet if you and me went down those steps to the chapel, we’d count the same amount of steps. It’s not different for every person.’

‘There would only be one way to find out. Then again, those steps are so old, some of them might not really even be steps any more.’ I shrugged. ‘Where’s Rachel? Talking with all the women?’

Francis snorted. ‘You’re very keen on her. You got all strange this morning.’ Up close I could see his eyes were almost black, they were so dark. Not eyes you could trust.

I puffed out my chest. 'No, I wasn't.' I was all right joking about this with Joe. But I barely knew Francis. 'It's important, seeing Anna get married. I was worried about that. If you think there's something wrong with that-'

Francis held his hands up, his bony wrists slipping loosely from his sleeves. 'I'm just saying, you got all in a muddle when you met my little cousin.' He laughed. 'No need to argue.'

'Pint of bitter, please.' Joe had moved in between us at the bar and apparently hadn't noticed trouble brewing. He paid, thanked the bald man, and looked at Francis. He took a long sip of his drink, then made an 'mmmm' noise.

'Your dad's got some good stories,' said Francis. 'Joe, wasn't it?'

'Yes.' Joe wiped some froth off his upper lip with the back of his hand. 'I know what you're thinking. The stories sound a bit mad.' He grinned. 'You're right, too. They are very mad, very very mad.'

Francis shuffled uncomfortably. Joe could have that effect on someone a bit straight like Francis. Like they didn't know what to say to him and it made them nervous. 'I'm just going to check when more of my lot are arriving,' he mumbled, and walked off.

'I could see you causing trouble from across the room,' said Joe. He was still watching Francis leave.

'I came over to make friends.' I caught the bald man's eye. 'Can I have a pint of bitter too, please?' He nodded, without smiling, and poured one for me. After I paid, I looked at the rich brown of it, the creamy foam on top, and thought of the waves at St Govan's chapel. 'It's a daft place to put a church.'

'Where's a daft place to put a church?'

'At the bottom of a cliff. How do you get there from town?'

'Folk probably lived nearer to the sea back then. Mr Parsons was saying about organizing a trip there some day – hard getting everyone there though.' Joe

thought about it for a moment. 'At least it's made out of stone. It would be dafter if it was tin.' He winked at me. 'Won't get rusty. Come to think of it, his bell won't get rusty, either.'

'Oh, the bell that got turned to stone.' I rolled my eyes.

'You believe in God, though?' said Joe. 'So that's not too hard to imagine. I mean, miracles are everywhere in the Bible.'

'Well, obviously.' There wasn't a question there. 'It just doesn't seem likely here. In Pembroke.'

'It wasn't in the town itself. It was out on the cliffs.' He took a long gulp of his drink. 'Still, I'm not sure if I believe all of that story about the bell.'

'Why not? Because it's too daft?'

'No, because-'

'What are you two talking about?'

I almost jumped Rachel's voice. 'Just fairy stories,' I said, leaning on the bar with my elbow and slipping slightly. 'Things about St Govan.'

'Fascinating man,' said Joe. He took a sip from his drink, and dribbled a bit on his fuzzy chin. Silly boy.

'This is Joe,' I said, waving my hand towards him.

'Nice to meet you, Joe. Do you work on the in the yard too?' She glanced back to Francis, drinking by the door alone.

Joe hesitated for a moment. 'Yes,' he said, 'I work at the docks. But let's not talk about work, it's all very dull really.' He quickly took another big gulp of beer.

'What were you saying about fairy stories?' asked Rachel.

'Just silly things, really.'

‘We were talking about the chapel at the cliffs, St Govan’s. Have you been there?’ said Joe.

‘No, I don’t think I have.’

‘The chapel’s magic,’ I said. ‘It’s at the bottom of a cliff, right by the sea. Joe’s Da is writing a book about it. There’s a bell that got turned into stone and lots of different steps.’ I realised I’d rambled like a little boy. Embarrassing. Come on, I thought.

‘How are they different?’ asked Rachel, frowning.

‘I mean...Joe, you know.’ I held my hand out to Joe, who grinned at me.

‘Everyone counts the amount of steps going down to the chapel differently,’ he said, ‘because it’s at the bottom of a cliff. So it’s quite a long way down.’

‘A lot of steps,’ I agreed.

‘So the steps are magic because people can’t count them?’ Rachel frowned.

‘But it’s all about faith,’ I said, not knowing quite what I was on about. Then I looked at Joe again. Come on, I thought, help me out.

‘Faith and how we look at it. Everyone believes in different ways,’ said Joe, ‘that’s interpretation. The steps are just...’ His brow furrowed. ‘What it actually looks like. We all see the same thing we all believe in, but in slightly different ways.’

‘Exactly,’ I said, ‘the steps are what faith look like.’ Didn’t really know what I meant, but it sounded clever.

‘That sounds a little far-fetched.’

‘Maybe one of these boys should take you to count them.’ Mr Davies had appeared at Rachel’s side. ‘A gentleman escort, eh?’

‘Dad!’ said Joe.

‘Fascinating character, St Govan. Had a lot of trouble with pirates. Or pagans. No, pirates, the story works better that way.’ Mr Davies opened his arms wide, as if he was going to try to hug all three of us. ‘The cliff once opened to hide him from them, these nasty pirates who were after his silver bell. The rock split, and shut around him like a secret door. When it was safe, it opened again, and he stepped out.’ He stepped past us to the bar and leaned on it. ‘You can still see the gap today. Even squeeze into it.’

‘He sounds like a lot of trouble,’ said Rachel.

‘Spreading the good word, it’s a dangerous business,’ said Mr Davies, winking. ‘I’m Niall.’ He held out his hand.

‘I’m Rachel.’ She shook it.

‘I don’t recognise you so you must be from the groom’s side. Pembroke Dock folk.’

Joe went a bit red. ‘Yes, Dad, she’s from Pembroke Dock.’

‘I know,’ said Mr Davies, scratching his head, ‘I just said that. Have you met my son, Rachel?’ He clapped his hand on Joe’s shoulder.

She laughed. ‘Yes, I’ve met Joe.’

‘And of course, you know David. Fine boys, fine boys.’ He turned to the bald man at the bar. ‘Pint for me, half for Gareth please, Stephen.’

‘Staying sharp, Mr Davies?’ I asked.

‘As ever, David, as ever. Well, Gareth is.’ He peered in Bryan’s direction. ‘I’d better take this over. He’ll want to be extra sharp when he’s plonking that piano.’ He set off with the drinks.

‘Those angels were bloody powerful,’ I said, to get the conversation back on track. ‘Govan wasn’t much use at all.’

‘He didn’t need to be,’ said Rachel. ‘He had the angels on his side.’

‘And,’ said Joe, ‘they only turned up because he believed like he did.’ He watched Gareth take the drink from Mr Davies. ‘Believe hard enough and something might happen.’ He turned to look at Rachel, then down at his shoes.

‘I think I’m going to see if my Mam needs help with anything,’ said Rachel. ‘The Russells haven’t arrived yet – they must have stopped in town somewhere. Nice speaking to you both.’ She looked at Joe. ‘We could talk about magical mysteries later.’ She turned and left.

‘Gosh,’ said Joe, before clearing his throat, ‘I can see why you get all...’ He pulled a face, crossing his eyes and poking his tongue out the corner of his mouth. ‘...around her. She’s beautiful.’

‘There’s plenty of good-looking girls, though,’ I said. ‘What about that Sophie from the shop?’

‘Who?’

‘You know. Mrs Shallcross’ daughter.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you speaking to Sophie Shallcross.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen *you* speaking to Sophie Shallcross.’

‘I didn’t say I had been.’ Joe furrowed his brow in thought. ‘I have bought the paper from her, though. So yeah, all right, I have been talking to her.’

‘Well, I didn’t say I’ve been speaking to her either,’ I said. ‘I mean, I have been. But not that much. But sometimes, you know, a girl will look at you and you just know.’

Joe looked confused. ‘Know what?’

‘That they think you’re...you know.’ I gave a little thrust of my hips. He kept looking confused.

‘Dave, you know how sometimes you say you don’t understand how I think?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘I know how you feel now.’

Chapter Five

‘Where are the Russells?’ asked Mam. ‘They were at the wedding. Why are they so late for this?’

She had sat down at a table next to Joe and I, and turned to look at him. ‘How are you enjoying the party, Joe?’

‘Very well, Mrs Farley,’ said Joe.

‘Have you tried the sandwiches?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘not quite enough mustard for me, I’m afraid.’

Mam’s nostrils flared, as if someone had put mustard under her nose. ‘Joe likes a lot of mustard,’ I said, hoping to help. I wasn’t sure what Mam’s reaction to anything was going to be today, it was all crying and shouting and smiling and saying thanks and being strict. Mad. ‘I mean, not everyone likes the same in their sandwiches.’

‘No,’ said Mam, ‘they don’t.’ She smiled. ‘Joe, dear, don’t you think a lot of mustard would ruin the taste of the beef?’ She was always like this, my Mam. She wouldn’t let anything go if she thought was right.

‘I like beef. But I like mustard more. In fact,’ said Joe, ‘I think I’d rather just have the beef sandwiches without the mustard.’ He looked off into the distance, not noticing Mam’s frown growing. ‘I’ve never had a sandwich that just had mustard in it.’

‘I thought the sandwiches were really nice, Mam.’ I beamed at her.

‘You ate a lot of them.’ Mam frowned and left, muttering about the Russells and being late.

‘What were you saying about mustard sandwiches?’ I said.

‘You never just have mustard in a sandwich. You always have to have something else.’ Joe shrugged. ‘It just seemed like a funny idea. You have sandwiches with just tomatoes in, after all.’

‘I don’t think Mam saw the funny side. You’d have been better off going on about St Govan’s crack again.’

‘Maybe. Rachel seemed interested.’ He looked around. ‘Where did she go, anyway?’

I shrugged, but looked around as well. ‘She’s probably off with her family. Why do you think Mam’s so worried about the Russells? She said they were at the church earlier.’

‘I wouldn’t know who they are,’ said Joe. ‘Wouldn’t know who to look for.’

‘Butchers, apparently.’

‘What,’ said Joe, ‘they...look like butchers?’ He laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Well, what do butchers look like? Are they...beefy?’ He laughed some more.

‘All the butchers I know are bigger. Big hands, big faces,’ I said. I started to laugh too. ‘So, yes. Beefy!’

‘Smoking big pipes that always look too small for them!’ Joe pretended to clutch a tiny pipe between his fingers, puffing delicately. It might have been because we’d had a couple of drinks, but I could feel tears on my cheeks from laughing. We always had a good laugh, coming up with daft jokes like that.

‘I haven’t laughed like that in a long time,’ I said. I snorted and wiped my eyes, remembering it had only been a few hours since I’d last felt my eyes water. ‘You know, I smoked Da’s pipe earlier.’

‘What was it like?’

‘It was great.’ I laughed. ‘Actually, it wasn’t. It tasted like manure. On fire.’

‘Not as good as cigarettes, then?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘You haven’t got any tobacco, have you?’

‘In front of my parents?’

‘We’re grown men,’ I said, even though we’d just giggled like little boys. ‘We can do what we like.’

‘We certainly can’t mention the mustard though.’

I squinted at Joe. ‘So you really can tell when my Mam’s annoyed, then?’

‘Not every time, and never until after I’ve said the wrong thing,’ said Joe. ‘It always seems a bit late to say sorry.’

‘She’s fine. Da’s always annoying her. So am I. Anna’s the only one who doesn’t seem to.’

‘Your Mam has done very well with this, though,’ said Joe, waving his arm across the room. People were starting to dance to the music now – not very well, but they were dancing.

‘Look at that,’ I said, ‘the guests are enjoying themselves. They’re enjoying themselves by throwing each other round the room, but they’re enjoying themselves.’ I could see Da dancing with Mrs Powell, as Mr Davies clapped along. ‘I don’t know what all the fuss was about,’ I said, ‘with bringing people from Pembroke and Pembroke Dock together.’

‘There was that time we nearly got a pasting,’ said Joe. ‘That started with them being in our town. Didn’t it?’

‘That wasn’t...we would have been fine,’ I said, not even sure anymore what the argument had actually been about. I decided to ask Joe what exactly he remembered, but he wasn’t looking at the dance floor any more. ‘I said, we would have been fine. Joe?’

He was watching the door. I looked over as well, to see Mam greeting a family. A short, broad-shouldered man with his hair combed over a bald patch, a woman built like her husband, and a younger man, about our age, with an impressive beard. An impressive ginger beard.

‘He didn’t have as much of the beard when he was starting on us in the pub, did he?’ said Joe, his hands now laid flat on the table.

‘The ginger boy’s a Russell,’ I said. I remembered Mam saying there was a Russell boy who was about my age.

‘Do we...do we wait for him to come over here?’ said Joe. ‘Is he going to try to fight us? He hasn’t got his big friend with him. Hasn’t got any friends with him.’

‘Maybe that means we can fight him?’ I said, before shaking my head. ‘No. This is family, no fighting. And actually he’s quite big himself.’

‘Maybe we shouldn’t have another beer for a while,’ said Joe. ‘As you said, this is family. We don’t want to cause trouble.’

‘What if he wants to cause trouble?’ I said. I knew Joe was thinking the same thing. ‘Look at him.’

‘I don’t want to. What if I look over at him and he’s looking over at us?’

‘That’s daft. He hasn’t seen us.’ We were both whispering now.

‘How do you know? You’re not looking at him. Let’s both look...now.’ We both raised our heads. I caught a glimpse of him; definitely the same lad, and he was looking directly at us, or at least I thought he was. I hadn’t time to really see.

‘Was he?’ I asked.

‘Why are you asking? You looked too.’

‘I was just checking. He was.’ I thought about how cold and glassy his eyes looked. ‘He looked like he wanted to cause trouble.’

‘He was looking at us like he wanted to hurt us, with his cold dead eyes,’ said Joe, nodding his head. ‘What do we do?’

‘Get him first?’ I said, miming throwing a little punch.

‘But he’s big. He looks bigger now than in the pub. Gigantic.’ Joe frowned. ‘Are you sure it’s the same boy?’

‘You saw him first!’

‘Actually, maybe we should have another beer,’ said Joe, shrugging. ‘Might relax us.’

‘Do you think so?’

He shook his head. ‘Not really. I don’t know what to do.’

‘We could just stay here.’

‘For the rest of the party?’ said Joe. ‘Into the night? Until it’s time to go home?’ He looked over to Rachel, who was dancing. ‘We won’t get to dance.’

‘But if we do...’ I twisted around to see that the ginger boy and his family were stood at the bar, with their backs to us. ‘Maybe we could get him when he doesn’t expect it.’

‘I thought you said we couldn’t fight him.’

I turned back at Joe. He looked disappointed. ‘Well, if he goes outside, then that’s outside the party, and we can take him on. If he’s alone. I don’t want to fight his dad, he looks even...’ I held my arms out wide.

‘What, fatter?’

‘No, you know, big. Like a rugby player.’

‘Oh,’ said Joe, ‘broad, you mean. So...your plan is to wait until he goes outside by himself – wait all night if need be – and then we, what, jump him?’

‘Something like that,’ I said. ‘In the meantime, we sit and wait.’

‘That sounds somehow both incredibly boring and incredibly violent,’ said Joe, frowning. ‘Maybe we should just say hello and hope he doesn’t hit either of us.’

I realised someone big and heavy was standing over me. I shuddered and looked up. ‘Why aren’t you boys getting up to dance?’ It was Da. I breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Come on, there’s a few pretty girls here now. Even you two might stand a chance with at least one of them.’

‘We’re just finishing our drinks, Mr Farley,’ said Joe, holding up his empty glass.

‘Looks like you’ve already finished yours,’ said Da, scratching his head. ‘How many have you had?’

‘Where’s Mam?’ I said.

‘Probably still chatting to Mrs Russell about dogs.’

‘We don’t have a dog,’ I said.

‘Well, the Russells do. Theirs has just had puppies, and we might be having one.’

‘The puppies aren’t ginger too, are they?’ asked Joe.

Da chuckled deeply. ‘You make me laugh, Joe. Have you two met the Russell boy yet? You should say hello, he doesn’t really know anyone else here and you’re about ages with him.’

Joe grimaced. ‘We haven’t met him yet. Well, we have, sort of.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Da.

‘Joe’s just a bit drunk,’ I said, ‘we haven’t met him. Right?’

‘You’re both acting very strangely,’ said Da. ‘More than usual, I mean. What’s going on? Are you both mooning over that Rachel? I was watching the three of you earlier.’

I'd almost forgotten about her. 'No, Mr Farley,' said Joe, 'it's not Rachel.' He sighed.

'It's the Russell lad,' I said, 'he's one of the ones from the pub.'

'You know him from the pub? Why don't you go and say hello then?'

'No, I mean, he was in the fight.'

'And he wasn't on your side?'

'No!' I said. 'Our side is sitting here, me and Joe.'

Da looked over to the Russells. The big lad was standing next to his father, watching the dancing. 'He's big, but he's shy,' said Da, 'are you sure it was him?'

'Definitely,' I said.

'I don't know any other big ginger boys,' said Joe.

'Right,' said Da. He looked at the big ginger boy again. 'David, you'll have to be a man about this.'

'What,' I said, 'go over and say let's go outside like men? If it just has to be me and him, I don't mind. You don't have to come, Joe.' I felt like I was going to wet myself.

Da laughed. 'No, I mean, you have to go over and shake his hand. This is your sister's wedding, and that ginger boy is...a relative of the Powells.'

'How are they related?' asked Joe. 'They don't look very alike.'

'I think they're someone's cousins. But however they're related, it's up to you to not turn this into some sort of feud.' Da shrugged. 'Anyway, even if he wasn't family now, you'd have to sort it out some time. It's a small town. In a year, you'll laugh about it.'

'What are you boys talking about?' Mam joined us.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Da interrupted. 'Sandwiches.'

She looked at Joe and frowned. 'Well, I need you over here, Llew. This is no time for sandwiches.'

'It's a party,' said Da, 'the perfect time for sandwiches.'

'You know what I mean,' she said. 'Come along.' She looked back at us as she left. 'I've had enough of sandwiches to last a lifetime.'

'Remember,' said Da as he turned to leave, 'be the bigger man. With those sandwiches.' He followed Mam. I looked at the Russells again. The ginger boy was looking at the dancefloor now, his eyes on Rachel. I felt a rumble in my stomach that wasn't the beer and mustard.

'I still say we could fight him,' I said.

'You don't want to be the bigger man today, then?' said Joe.

'What will that prove?'

'I think your Da meant it would prove you're the bigger man. And that's...probably something in itself.'

'You're a part of this too, Joe.'

'Then I suppose it would be both of us being the bigger men.' Joe shrugged. 'I'd hate to see what your Da would do to us if we started anything, anyway.'

'Maybe we don't have to start it,' I said, nudging Joe with my elbow.

'I've got a horrid feeling about whatever you're about to say,' said Joe.

'You don't know what I'm going to say!'

'I bloody do, Dave! You're going to say we should make it look like the ginger boy,' he said, jabbing his finger in the Russells' direction, 'started something with us. You'll say each of us can back the other one so it looks like his fault.'

'I didn't think about that.'

'Really?'

‘No, I mean us both saying he’d started it,’ I said. ‘Then we can’t be blamed.’

‘Are you really sure that’s sensible?’

‘Of course,’ I said, ‘there’s two of us.’ I looked back at the ginger boy. He’d stopped staring at Rachel, and had turned back to the bar. ‘We’ve always got each other’s back.’

‘What got you so worked up?’ asked Joe. ‘You were content to sit here and not move all night ten minutes ago. So was I.’ He swept his arm over himself, slumped in his chair. ‘I still am, to be honest.’

‘Well, he’s come down here, moving in on our party,’ I said. Joe was right, I had been content to just sit there and take it. But I’d seen the beardy boy giving Rachel the eye, and I wasn’t having any of that. A big hulking brute like him trying to chat up a girl like her? Didn’t bear thinking about.

‘He was invited, though,’ said Joe. ‘I mean, this is a family party. Well, family and friends.’ He pointed to his own face and grinned. ‘He may be from Pembroke Dock, but so is the groom. Nothing has happened yet between the Pembroke and the Dock people, which is great, obviously. You don’t really want to be the one to start something, do you?’

‘No,’ I said, folding my arms. I looked up at the ginger boy again. He was speaking to his dad. ‘We should probably just ignore him.’

‘That would be a start.’ Joe sighed. ‘We can just sit here a bit longer. Maybe run to the bar and back when he goes to the toilet.’

‘I should have known we’d end up like this,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s all been going so well so far,’ I said. ‘All of us from the two towns together. Getting on. Something was bound to go wrong.’

‘If I’m being honest, Dave,’ said Joe, ‘that sounds daft. What you’re saying, then, is that we can’t all be friends for longer than a few hours?’

‘You’ve made as many jokes about the Dock as I have,’ I said, ‘remember what you said earlier about Dock girls?’

‘Well, that was just a laugh,’ said Joe. He looked nervously at Rachel, who had sat down on the other side of the dance floor. ‘I didn’t actually mean it. Besides, it’s worth pointing out that we both owe our living to the shipyard and, because of that, the Dock itself. Makes you think.’ I could already see his eyes clouding over. Well, he could think on his own time. I snapped my fingers in his face.

‘What are we going to do, Joe?’ I said, urgently. ‘We can’t really sit here and hope to not bump into him.’

‘Especially not now,’ said Joe, ‘I’ve finished my drink.’

‘Hello boys. Why aren’t you dancing?’ Mr Davies sat down in front of us, blocking our view of the dancefloor. ‘You’ve been here for an age. Gareth’s bashing away at that piano.’ He was right there. I’d been looking over at him occasionally, and could see him playing fast. Faster than I’d ever seen anyone play a piano before. I didn’t know anything about music, but what he was playing sounded almost...new, like something no-one had played before. Or like music from another country, which just about made sense but sort of seemed like it was falling apart. His arms – which had seemed stubby when he’d just been leaning earlier – now looked twice as long, moving furiously up and down the keys. When he turned to watch the dancers, grinning madly, his moustache was wet with sweat. I had no ear for music, but even I could tell this was something different.

‘I don’t know what he’s playing, but it has everyone moving,’ said Mr Davies. ‘Seems like a waste for you boys not to join in.’

‘Dad, we’re fine not dancing. Besides...there’s someone we don’t really want to run into.’

‘Honestly, Joseph, we’re at a wedding. It’s not that big ginger boy, is it?’

‘How did you know that?’ I said.

‘I was talking to him about puppies,’ said Mr Davies. He took a slow sip of his drink, and left the foam moustache sit a little too long after. He wiped at it absent-mindedly. ‘He mentioned that he’d met you too before, and was hoping to say hello. We talked about geese too, what with Christmas-’

‘Did he mention how he knew us?’

‘From the pub,’ said Mr Davies. ‘I’m surprised he hasn’t just come over to say hello, though.’ He squinted at us. ‘Did one of you do something to upset him?’

‘No, he started on us!’ I said.

‘Had you had a few beers?’ Mr Davies chuckled.

‘Well...’ said Joe.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but it wasn’t our fault.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course,’ I said. My memory was a little hazy, but we were in the pub at the time, so that’s natural.

‘Not really, now you say it,’ said Joe.

‘Joe! He started on us. He pushed you,’ I said.

‘His friend pushed both of us, I think,’ said Joe. He frowned. ‘We weren’t making jokes about Dockers, were we?’

‘No, we never...’ I stopped and frowned too. ‘Definitely not. We wouldn’t have, just like that. Not out in the pub. In case there were any around.’ I sniffed. ‘Not that there should be, in Pembroke. Our town.’

‘Whether they should be there or not,’ said Joe, ‘maybe we should have been more careful saying stupid things.’

‘We wouldn’t be saying stupid things though, would we?’ I said, trying not to think about a different time when we’d been chased out of Cromwell’s Tavern for

doing silly Irish voices when there were a bunch of Irish boys in there. We'd run all the way up Main Street and hid down New Way.

'I've known you both since you were little,' said Mr Davies, 'and careless both of you can certainly be. But if you don't remember it, it can't have been that bad.' He stood up. 'I just hope Robin thinks that.'

'Robin?' I said.

'Robin Russell. The ginger lad. He has a name,' said Mr Davies. Rachel walked past our table. 'Oh, Rachel. Dance with one of these two, they've been sat here for hours being very dull.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Well, I wouldn't want to bother them.' She looked from me to Joe. 'I keep thinking you two are going to get up and dance with each other, anyway.'

'Go on, Joe,' said Mr Davies, 'don't keep the lady waiting.'

Joe stood up. His hands seemed to be shaking a little. 'I,' he said, and cleared his throat. 'I have to go to the toilet.'

'Oh,' said Rachel. 'I don't really want to dance in there.'

'Maybe for the next song,' said Joe. 'Dave, why don't you get up and dance? I'll be back in a few minutes.' He walked off stiffly.

'Strange boy,' said Mr Davies, shaking his head. 'Oh well, up you go, David.' He gripped my arm and hauled me to my feet. He was a lot stronger than he looked.

'I can't really dance,' I mumbled, as Mr Davies gently shoved me at Rachel.

'I'm not even sure what the man at the piano is doing,' said Rachel, over the loud music, 'so I don't really know what I'm doing, either. Come on.'

'Pianist,' I said, feeling a little smug.

'Pardon?'

‘Never mind. After you.’ I swept my hand out towards the floor. She stepped out first, and I followed. I wasn’t really sure if I should take her hand. At least Gareth had slowed down to a normal speed again. I took a quick glance at the bar to see the ginger lad – Robin Russell – looking right at me.

‘Don’t just stand still!’ said Rachel. ‘You have to move around a bit. That’s what dancing is.’

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘I was...’ I didn’t really have a good answer. I looked around to see what everyone else was doing. I hadn’t done a lot of dancing before.

‘It’s all right,’ said Rachel, ‘nobody else really knows what to do either.’

‘Our families can’t dance,’ I said, nodding in agreement and trying to move my arms in time to the music. I thought about a chicken we used to walk past on the way to school that had always come out to greet us, flapping its wings.

‘They’re graceless,’ said Rachel. She smirked. ‘You are a bit, too.’

‘I’m...I’m warming up,’ I said looking down at my feet. I tried wiggling them, but it was hard to do it in any way that looked good.

‘I’m not laughing at you,’ she said, giggling. ‘Well, I am a little. But don’t worry about it.’

I looked back to Mr Davies. Joe had joined him and looked a little sad. When he saw me looking, he crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out, then stopped suddenly. I turned back to Rachel to see her looking too. She laughed. ‘He’s a funny one, your friend. I like him.’

‘He’s daft,’ I said, ‘but he’s my friend.’

‘At least you got to come here with him. Imagine having to spend time with Francis.’ She nodded to the piano, where Francis was standing with someone’s young cousin – possibly one of mine – copying Gareth, making fun. He was laughing, showing off the fact that a few of his teeth were missing.

‘He’s daft too,’ I said.

‘Not like Joe, though,’ said Rachel. ‘Your dancing is getting better.’ She smiled weakly. ‘Why does Robin keep looking at you?’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘we’ve, ah, met before.’

‘Does he work with you, like John?’

‘No, we know each other a different way. I hear you two are cousins?’

‘I think so,’ she said, ‘we’re a big family. So, yes, I think we might be.’

‘His family have a lot of dogs,’ I said. Felt like a silly thing to say, but it had come out before I’d been able to get a grip on it.

‘Just one, I think,’ she said, ‘although she’s just had puppies.’

I turned to look back at the ginger lad – Robin – and the music stopped. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned to see Mam. ‘Gareth’s just stopped for a short break, I think.’ She frowned. ‘Yes, your father’s just taken him a drink of water.’

‘And his half,’ I said, nodding as I looked over to the pianist. ‘Got to stay sharp.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Rachel.

‘It’s just something Gareth says,’ I said.

‘Is he the piano player?’

‘Yes, we thought we’d ask him,’ said Mam, ‘as he’s always been such a nice man, and we knew he’d be able to step in, what with...’ She lowered her voice, even though we weren’t anywhere near him. ‘He’s very old, Rachel.’

‘He looks quite old,’ she said.

Mam smiled, then looked at me and frowned. Before I knew what she was doing, she was tugging at the knot in my tie. ‘Mam!’ I said. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Your tie had come loose,’ she said. ‘Honestly, David. You’d have been more embarrassed if I’d left it the way it was.’ She looked at Rachel, then back at me, and smiled at me. ‘Well, I’d better go and see what your father’s doing.’

‘Sorry,’ I said, not knowing why.

‘Your mum seems nice,’ said Rachel.

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. Thankfully, Joe had joined us before I could come out with anything too stupid. ‘That music was a bit strange towards the end,’ said Joe.

‘You should have tried dancing to it,’ said Rachel.

‘Maybe I will when Gareth sits back down at his piano.’ Joe looked over to Gareth, who was being fondly gripped around the shoulders by Mr Davies. ‘If he lives long enough to play any more.’

‘He is very old,’ I said. ‘An ancient Welshman drinking his halves. The prince of the pub-men.’

‘Is he Welsh?’ said Joe.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Rachel.

‘I’ve always thought he sounded like an Irishman,’ said Joe. ‘Only a little bit.’

‘That would explain the drinking,’ I said, and laughed. Joe sniggered, but looked away awkwardly.

‘Maybe,’ said Rachel. ‘You boys stay here. I’m just going to get a drink.’

Joe watched her go, then turned back to me. ‘Dave, I’m not sure you should say things like that about the Irish to people you don’t know very well,’ said Joe. ‘We don’t live that far from Ireland, you know. In fact, there’s a lot of Irish people around here. I even do think Gareth might have been Irish once.’

Bit know-it-all, I thought. And it spoils the fun if you stop and think about stuff like that too much. 'You can't just stop being Irish and turn Welsh though,' I said.

'What about if you stay in one place for a long, long time though?'

'I suppose,' I said. 'Shall we go and get a beer?'

'What about-?' Joe's mouth stayed open. He was staring at Robin Russell – the big ginger lad – who was marching towards us. He had the same look on his face that I'd seen earlier. His eyes were glassy but appeared smaller next to his beard, which looked even bigger now he was heading straight for us.

'He's going to finish what he started in the pub,' I said, and laughed without knowing why. 'He's so much bigger than both of us, and he doesn't care that both our families are here.' I looked at Joe, hoping he'd say something to prove me wrong. 'Right?'

'He really doesn't care,' he murmured. 'He'll hit one of us before anyone notices something's wrong. Maybe even both of us. Two fists for two daft boys who should have kept their mouths shut.'

I wanted to find Mum immediately and tell her what was going on, but it was too late. The rugby club wasn't that large a building, and Robin was standing right in front of us.

'Hello,' said Joe, swallowing loud enough for me to hear. Robin looked him up and down. His face hardly moved, but his brow furrowed a little deeper. 'Could we...I mean, that is to say...would you like a drink?'

I elbowed Joe for being cowardly, but couldn't think of anything to say either. 'Hello,' I said, in almost exactly the same tone as Joe.

'You boys,' said Robin, and looked around the room. He didn't move his head much, but his eyes darted frantically back and forth like a madman. 'I know you, don't I?'

Joe and I looked at each other. Did Robin actually did remember us? Was he just working up to his attack?

‘I know you, don’t I?’ he said, drawing it out this time. I hadn’t noticed his voice before, in the pub. It was a thick, deep voice. Each word was drawn out, like it was hard work. He even sounded a bit like he was from the north of the county. Welsher than our words.

‘You might do,’ said Joe. He raised his empty glass and tried to drink from it.

‘You probably saw us at the wedding,’ I said, nodding.

Robin squinted at me, looking me right in the eye. I’ve never been the sharpest of boys, but thinking looked like hard work for this one. Then again, who needs to think when you have hands like shovels? ‘No,’ he said, ‘I know you from...’ His squint shrank to an even smaller size. It looked like his eyes had just closed. I braced myself, stiffening my spine. If he hit me, I was going to stay standing. That, I thought, would surprise him for a moment so I could get my shot in. ‘From the pub, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I said, balling my hands into fists at my side, ‘from the pub. I think.’

‘Right,’ he said, and held out his hand. I looked at it. I felt Joe nudging me. ‘We’ll have to go there together sometime, now.’

Joe elbowed me again, so I shook Robin’s hand. ‘Yes,’ I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Was he still planning something?

‘You’re David, right?’ He was squinting a little less now, but still squinting. I nodded. He looked at Joe. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Joe.’ He held out his hand and they shook.

‘You family too?’ asked Robin.

‘Not really,’ said Joe. ‘I spend a lot of time with Dave. Like we’re family.’

‘Thick as thieves, eh?’ said Robin. ‘Good to have mates like that.’ He turned back to me. ‘Seen you dancing with Rachel.’

‘Yes,’ I said, unsure of what to say to that.

‘You look after her, all right? Nice to talk to you. Look forward to having a drink with you.’ He nodded at both of us, his big beard dipping into his chest. It was wispy up close; tangled ends of it twisted off in different directions.

‘I will,’ I said quietly, but he was already walking back to his parents.

‘We managed to live through that, then.’ Joe put his hand on my shoulder. I brushed it off.

‘He must have known when to back down,’ I said. ‘See, we look like we know how to handle ourselves. Even if it’s just me who’s up for a fight, at least we look like we’re both ready for it.’

‘I’m not sure he even remembered us.’ Joe scratched his head. ‘I mean, maybe he picks fights with lots of people in pubs. Or maybe we met an entirely different big ginger boy in the pub before.’

I shook my head. ‘It was definitely him. Maybe he’s still waiting to try something. You heard what he said at the end, there. About looking after his cousin.’

‘He was very presumptuous about your intentions towards Rachel,’ said Joe. ‘But then, that’s family. Imagine if you saw Anna dancing with some man you’d only met today. You would have been protective. You’re only all right with John because you know him now.’

‘I suppose.’

‘And he is quite a bit bigger than you.’

I winced. ‘I suppose that’s true too.’

‘Of course, Robin might have been the boy in the pub, knew it was us, and come over anyway.’

‘Why didn’t he say anything about the fight then?’

‘Maybe it was like your dad said. Maybe he thinks family’s more important,’ said Joe, ‘and he wanted to be the bigger man.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said, although I thought that sounded about right. ‘Or maybe he knew it was us but decided he couldn’t fight us both without his mates here to back him up.’

Joe grinned and patted me on the back. ‘As you say, Dave. Maybe.’ He looked into his empty glass. ‘Let’s get another drink.’

We went to the bar and waited for the bald man to come down to our end. I had the odd feeling that someone was standing just behind me, and, thinking it might be Robin come back again, turned around as calmly as I could.

‘Got to stay sharp,’ said Gareth, raising his half-empty glass to us. He smiled and his gaze lingered on Joe.

‘All right, Gareth,’ I said, ‘I enjoyed your piano-playing.’

He waved his free hand to one side, and kept his eyes on Joe. ‘Did you know,’ he said, ‘that I was a monk?’

‘Really?’ said Joe, almost keeping the snigger out of his voice. It was exactly the sort of thing we’d have expected Gareth to come out with. Who knew where he plucked his thoughts from?

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘out on Caldey. Ynys Byr, we called it then. Before you were born. I still spend a lot of time with God.’

‘Oh really?’ I quickly looked at Joe. Thankfully, Gareth didn’t notice.

‘He says there’s a lot of love in you.’ He was still looking at Joe, who was now smiling back with his mouth open. ‘A lot of love.’

Joe cleared his throat. ‘Really?’

‘Remember that,’ he said, draining his glass and setting it on the bar. He looked at me as if I’d just turned up. ‘Oh, hello, David,’ he said, beaming, and ambled back to the piano.

‘Well, that was strange,’ said Joe.

‘It was. Did Gareth just say he loved you?’ I said.

‘What did he mean?’ asked Joe.

‘There’s a lot of love in you.’ I shrugged. I couldn’t see it myself. Joe always seemed a bit gawky around girls. ‘I wouldn’t take it to heart, Joe. He said God told him.’

‘You believe in God though, don’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘but I don’t think he just turns up and talks to people. That’s daft.’

‘Imagine that, though. Knock on the door one day. “Hello?” Oh, it’s God.’

‘What would he look like?’

Joe peered round the room, then saw what he was looking for. ‘That man, over there.’

I turned. Joe had singled out Uncle Phillip, who had a shock of white hair and a long curly beard. ‘Probably,’ I said. ‘It’s how I’ve always imagined Him to look.’

The bald barman appeared. ‘Yes, gentlemen?’

‘You know,’ said Da, ‘I was right about that Russell lad. You didn’t go in talking about the fight, or whatever it was, and you were fine.’ He belched loudly, put his hand over his mouth, and chuckled. ‘Excuse me.’ He sipped his beer. ‘Your mother didn’t hear that, did she?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘I think Gareth’s playing drowned you out,’ said Joe. Gareth was back at the piano and bashing at it like a man half his age. Younger, even.

‘I don’t know what he’s playing,’ said Da, ‘but I like it. The notes sound random, but...right.’ It was so odd to hear Da talking about musical notes. He always said he had no ear for it too. I thought he was a bit drunk. ‘Why are we all sat down? We should be dancing.’ He grinned and grabbed my arm. ‘What about that girl, David?’

‘What about what girl?’ I said, squirming. Joe chuckled to himself next to me.

‘The girl. John’s sister. No, cousin. Rachel. You should ask her to dance again.’

‘There’s plenty of time,’ I said, ‘if she wants another dance, she can always let me know.’ I looked around the room. There were a few other girls there too, but I felt funny. I wanted to dance with Rachel again. I just didn’t feel up to the asking.

‘That’s not how it works,’ said Da. ‘If you don’t ask her again, someone else will. Look at Joe over there.’ He pointed wildly at Joe, even though he was sitting at the same table. ‘I’m sure if he asked, she’d be very happy to dance with him. I’d ask her myself, but I’m too old...and too, ah, married.’ He belched again.

Joe snorted with laughter. ‘Mr Farley, I think you should come down the pub with Dave and I more often.’

‘I would if he ever invited me.’ Da laughed loudly, a deep belly-rumbling guffaw.

‘Well now, you’re always invited,’ said Joe. ‘I’m going to the bar. Dave, would you like another? Mr Farley?’

‘Not just now, thank you, Joe,’ said Da, ‘I’d better slow down. Stay sharp, eh?’ He winked. I rolled my eyes.

‘All right. I’ll be back in a minute.’ Joe patted me on the back as he turned, and walked off.

‘Dad,’ I said, ‘I was going to ask Rachel to dance again. It’s just, well, last time, I had some help.’

‘You had help? What do you mean?’

‘Well, Mr Davies sort of made me dance with her. I wanted to,’ I added quickly, ‘but it was a lot easier with him there...making it happen.’

‘Well, that won’t do,’ said Da. ‘There’s going to be a time when you’re on your own. With nobody else. Then who’s going to make you do the hard things?’

I looked down into my empty glass. ‘I can do it. I’m a man.’ I looked around. ‘Where’s Rachel now?’

Da turned in his seat too. ‘She’s over there, talking to Joe.’

I followed his gaze and saw her. Joe had our drinks on the bar in front of him, and she was laughing at something he was saying. I wasn’t sure if I should wait for him to come back with the beer, or go over and interrupt them. Then I thought of what Da had said. Any other bloke might go and ask her to dance. Any bloke, even my gawky best mate who was normally rubbish with girls.

She was laughing a lot at whatever Joe was saying. I stood up.

‘I thought Joe was bringing you your drink?’ said Da.

‘I’m going to get her. It. My drink.’ I pushed my chair in, the legs scraping on the wooden floor. As I strode over to the bar, I seemed to be moving in time to the music Gareth was playing. It was fast, then slow, like it couldn’t decide what speed to move at. My toes were curling and my knees felt crooked and awkward, as if I’d forgotten how to walk.

‘Joe!’ I said, my throat a little dry.

‘Hello Dave,’ he said, ‘I was just going to bring your beer over to you.’ He looked back and forth from me to Rachel.

‘Joe was just telling me about what Gareth said,’ said Rachel.

‘Yes, Gareth’s a funny old man.’ I tried to say more about it, but all I could feel was the spit welling up under my tongue. I’d forgotten how to walk and now, I thought, talking’s going too. ‘Rachel...’ I asked her if she wanted to dance again.

‘Sorry, David?’ How could she have not heard? I realised that I had said it too quickly. Joe looked at his feet. He must be embarrassed for me, I thought.

‘Do you want to dance again?’ I gestured to the dancefloor with my arm, waving it a little too much.

‘I can do,’ she said, looking from me back to Joe. He was still looking down at his feet. ‘In fact, yes. Let’s have another dance, David.’ She held her hand out. Before, we’d just been moving around in the same space, next to each other. This was something new. I tried to think. I had definitely held girls’ hands before. That Sophie Shallcross had linked arms with me, I thought, which was similar. I mean, I had tripped over a box and she was helping me up, but she still touched me.

I looked down at my own hand, then gripped hers, fearing that the spaces between my fingers were sweaty. I brought my eyes up from our fingers to see her looking at Joe again, then back to me. ‘Let’s go and dance then,’ I said, not sure whether I should move towards the dance floor first.

‘Speak to you later, Joe,’ said Rachel.

He nodded, and winked at me. I winced, hoping Rachel hadn’t noticed.

Chapter Six

After, and it felt like a long time after, Joe and I smoked outside. It could only have been the length of a couple of songs. Music can stretch a night like that. As can holding a pretty girl's hand.

'You really like her then?' said Joe. Before I could reply, he coughed loudly and wiped his eyes.

'You just can't smoke,' I said, and laughed.

'I think I'm ill,' said Joe. He spat on the grass. 'You didn't answer my question.'

'What was it?' I burped loudly and giggled. It stank a bit. Mustard.

He put his cigarette to his mouth again. As he breathed in, the end of it burned and lit his face up in orange. 'Rachel. You really like her.'

I shrugged. 'Well,' I said, trying not speak too quickly, 'she's a pretty girl.'

'She laughs too,' said Joe, hiccupping and coughing again. 'When you say funny things, she laughs.'

'All girls laugh,' I said.

'Yes, but they've always laughed at me.' He put on a funny high-pitched voice. "You're such a strange boy, Joe Davies!" He giggled and pretended to turn and walk away, before spinning back around to face me, speaking in his normal voice. 'That's what the normal girls do. And normal boys, come to think of it.'

'Are you saying Rachel's not normal then?' I frowned.

'She's not,' said Joe.

'There's nothing wrong with her,' I said, snorting. I felt annoyed, which was pretty unusual when it came to Joe.

‘I know, Dave, that’s what I’m saying,’ he said. ‘Maybe I’m not saying it very well though.’

I inhaled deeply on the last of my cigarette and held the smoke in my throat for a moment. I knew Joe didn’t mean it when he said odd things like that. But why did he have to go saying she wasn’t normal?

I coughed roughly and felt stickiness rising in my throat. I’d left the smoke in there for too long. Joe slapped me on the back. ‘You all right?’

‘I’m fine,’ I said, still coughing, but laughing too. ‘So, you like Rachel then?’

Joe’s hand, still on my back, went stiff. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, do you approve?’ I said. ‘It’s important. You’re my best mate.’

‘Yes.’ Joe rubbed my back with his hand. ‘I do like her. I mean, I approve.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Here, stop rubbing my back like that. It’s sort of...funny.’ I wriggled away and he laughed. ‘Can’t have Rachel seeing anything like that going on.’

‘No, we can’t,’ said Joe, sighing. ‘Come on,’ he said, yawning, ‘let’s go back inside and get your girl.’

‘Don’t go saying things like that, either,’ I said, ‘there’s plenty of girls out there for me. It’s just...this one tonight.’

Joe sighed. ‘Come on, in we go then.’

After the last dance, people started to leave. I was surprised so many had stayed for as long as they had. Rachel looked at me and giggled. ‘Thank you,’ she said, and walked back to her cousins.

“‘Thank you?’” I repeated, as Joe joined me. My ears had that odd whooshing sound in them that you get after being in a noisy room. Gareth’s last few songs had

seemed even louder than earlier, the piano clanging and seeming to dance around each wrong note without quite hitting it.

‘I didn’t really do anything,’ said Joe.

‘No, it’s what Rachel just said. What did she mean?’

‘Probably “thank you for that lovely dance”. Or maybe “thank you for not treading on my toes too much”.’

‘You weren’t treading on that poor girl’s toes, were you?’ said Mr Davies, appearing beside his son. ‘She won’t like that, you know.’

‘I didn’t tread on her toes once,’ I said, although I had slightly trodden on them twice. At least. ‘Not once,’ I added.

‘If you say so,’ said Mr Davies, raising his eyebrows and chortling. ‘Gareth was getting a bit carried away with that piano, wasn’t he?’

‘Where is Gareth?’ asked Joe.

‘Where do you think?’ said Mr Davies, smiling. He turned and nodded towards the bar, where Gareth was leaning and sipping his half. He seemed to already be looking right at us, and raised his glass.

‘Did Joe tell you what Gareth said to him earlier?’ I said. The woozy feeling from dancing with Rachel was wearing off. Probably just all the moving about.

‘No,’ said Mr Davies.

‘He said God told him I had a lot of love in me,’ said Joe. His face creased with laughter.

‘Strange man,’ said Mr Davies, which made me chuckle. Joe’s father didn’t really have any business calling anyone a strange man. ‘Still,’ he said, ‘He must have meant something by it. If he believed he saw something good in you, son, then, well, why not?’

‘Because he said God told him,’ said Joe, lowering his voice. ‘I don’t think God’s that interested in me.’

‘Why not?’ said Mr Davies. ‘Gareth believed what he said.’

I rubbed my eyes. I was beginning to feel the length of the day. The itch in my starched collar had come back. My mouth tasted a bit sour. ‘It’s a little late for this,’ I said.

‘The world’s very big, David,’ said Mr Davies, ‘and it’s always going to be a bit late to talk about it.’ He looked back to the bar, absent-mindedly. ‘Do you think I’ll be able to get a last drink for the night?’ Before either of us could answer, he was tottering back to the bar.

Joe and I looked at each other and giggled. I could see dark patches under his eyes and he kept hopping up and down on one foot. It had always been his way of trying to stay awake past bedtime. I yawned and he did the same.

‘You two look like you need to get some sleep,’ said Anna, who had appeared with John. She sounded a little tipsy.

‘I thought you two had gone home,’ I said, and yawned again. It was good seeing her happy.

‘Without saying goodbye?’ said John.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Anna. They looked at each other and smiled. Then, Anna took a step forward and took my hand. ‘David,’ she said, ‘you are so very, very silly.’

‘And?’ I said.

‘Don’t ever stop.’ She kissed me on the cheek. ‘Well, we will actually be leaving now. Thank you for a wonderful day.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ I said.

‘That is true,’ said Joe, ‘he didn’t, I’ve been watching.’

I elbowed him in the ribs, and looked at John. 'Take care, John.'

He nodded. 'Always.' They left, Anna still giggling a little. I took a deep breath. Widened my eyes. I felt them trying to close. What a long day. Mam and Da came over, and Mam pulled me in for a hug. I thought about falling asleep there and then in her arms.

'You're very heavy, David,' she said in my ear.

'Mam!' I broke free. Joe was laughing.

'Well, you are,' she said, 'it's like hugging a grown man.'

'I...never mind.' I kissed her on the cheek. 'Are we going home then?'

'Yes,' said Da, 'I think we are. Thanks for coming, Joe.' He shook Joe's hand. I could see Joe wincing a little at Da's grip.

'Yes, thank you,' said Mam.

'It was a pleasure,' said Joe. 'I'll be seeing you on Monday then, Dave.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I'll be seeing you.'

'You, ah...' Joe trailed off.

'I what?'

'You thinking of seeing Rachel again?' He pulled his handkerchief, daft little thing, from his pocket and fiddled with it.

'I am thinking,' I said, quietly as Mam and Da turned to leave, 'of doing just that.'

Outside, the autumn air was cold in my mouth, cleaning out the sour taste. I gulped at it, even as I shivered in my starched collar, sweat cooling against my throat. We headed up the path to the road in silence, the damp ground squelching slightly with each step, the sound of our feet marching on it sounding like a big mouth chewing.

‘Goodnight.’ He didn’t say it loudly, but it was so quiet out in the night that it was like he’d screamed it. I thought we’d left him inside, but as I followed the sound to my left, I saw Gareth lying on his back on the grass.

‘Are you all right, Gareth?’ asked Da.

‘I’m fine, Llewellyn,’ he said, ‘I’m just looking.’ I looked up to see what he was staring at. It was a cloudy night. No stars.

‘Is someone helping you home, Gareth?’ asked Mam.

‘Yes,’ said Gareth. I wasn’t convinced, but I don’t think any of us could have moved him. ‘Goodnight, now. Nos da, hywel fawr.’

‘Goodnight,’ I said. I started walking ahead and could hear Mam and Da following, whispering quite loudly about Gareth. I started wondering what he could see in those deep blue clouds streaking the dark, before deciding it was always best not to follow the pub-man too closely. Instead, I thought about Rachel, and the clumsy dance we’d shared.

September 1942 - Damned

Chapter One

Tin. It's always tins that I have trouble with. It's not that I'm impractical. I've managed on my own while David's been away. I've always done all the accounts anyway. As for all the climbing up on ladders to get things off shelves, that's been fine too.

We were lucky to have this. It got David away from the docks anyway, as much as my cousins turned their noses up at the thought of him being a shopkeeper. When we got married, David didn't even know about the family's shop. Who else was my uncle going to pass the place on to?

But this tin. Damn this tin, and damn this damned tin opener. Shouldn't say damn. Then again, why not? It's already the end of the world. Why shouldn't this damned tin opener be damned, as long as the rest of us are? Especially here. The end of the world, at the edge of the world. That's what Joe calls Pembrokeshire. Because, he says, it's as close as you can get to Ireland without falling into the sea.

The tin opener moves along the lid. I can't stop thinking of terrible things. It's not just David – not just his death. I'd been so glad we swapped Pembroke Dock for Pembroke. Hell blossomed out of the Dock that early summer night last year. That was when I knew. Maybe that's why the telegram yesterday didn't quite feel so bad. I knew hell was real. I'd seen the lines of people wandering down Bush Hill, holding babies and cats and books. Trucks driving back and forth full of people-cattle. Pillars of black smoke blotted across the sky, the Three Crowns where David and Joe used to sneak off to after work turned into charred, stubby walls. Yes, I knew then.

Hell was real, and it was here. In fucking Pembroke Dock. In a lot of other places too, but here where we grew up and lived and loved and wrapped up our memories in their hazy parcels, here the Devil came to sit – right on our doorstep. There wasn't much else to be scared of after that.

I'm opening up a tin of spam. It's the fleshiest meat I've ever eaten. I don't think it existed before the war. The half-open tin breathes at me. Pork and bacon never smell this piggy. Even living pigs on farms don't smell this piggy.

Spam sandwich for lunch then. The shop is closed for an hour, so I can really enjoy my spam sandwich while people die a long way away. I've been trying not to close in the day but I think I deserve it. Let others lose an hour of normal, just this once. I've lost a lifetime of it in a day.

The spam lies on the dry bread. Butter's hard to come by at the moment. Probably always will be. I take a moment to look at the meat. Shut my eyes but keep seeing it, pink and glistening. Ready but raw-looking. Prepared for the next slice of bread to be laid down. Crusted coffin lid.

I snort with laughter and my eyes open. This isn't a funeral. It's lunch. I try to compose myself and snort again, wiping a tear off my cheek. I put the second slice on and squash it slightly. David's mother used to do that. It makes the sandwich taste nicer, apparently. Even if you're worried there's a little too much mustard in the sandwich.

When the world ends, in that last second before the burning, we'll think about the past. Why would we think about anything else? No future. So why even consider it? Only I'm not really thinking about the past, I'm thinking of my sandwich and I feel foolish for it. It's such a little thing – lunchtime in a world on fire. Maybe later, teatime with the Devil.

The bell dings even though I've turned the sign over. I open my mouth to shout that I'll be out in a minute, even though I want to tell whoever it is to fuck off because it's lunchtime. I never used to even think about the word fuck, let alone want to throw it at someone. But whatever I was planning to say gets stuck behind the spam and mushy bread in my mouth. I'm clogged up. I can't even remember biting into my lunch. I've lost precious seconds. Time slipped away, again. Off the clock.

I manage to swallow just as the little door to the back room opens. I'm ready to be angry with this person for disturbing me right now, while I'm having this sacred time. The urge to say fuck off rises again, and I almost manage it. 'Mum?' He enters

as if he were expecting worse than rude words, stooping a little. Pushes his glasses up his nose, tries standing to attention.

‘Daniel.’ I’m not sure what to say next. He looks at me, then at the sandwich, now back on the plate.

‘I said I’d drop by,’ he says, ‘remember?’ His shirtsleeves are rolled up.

‘Is it hot out?’ He looks scruffy. He looks like David.

‘It’s hot in,’ he says, shrugging. Then he laughs. I think I’m going to smile, but I apparently don’t because he stops laughing very quickly. ‘The middle of summer. You know.’

‘It’s the end of summer.’ My turn to shrug.

‘It’s still summer. Still hot.’ He opens his arms. Daniel’s always been one for cwtches and cuddles. Never in front of David, of course, but he was such a sensitive boy. He hides it now he’s a man, but I know that’s my cue to hug him. I stand still. ‘Come here, Mum.’ Mum. Not Mam or Ma. That’ll be all the English boys in his school. Years ago. I’m there, I’m here. Then and now. Now, in a minute.

I can feel my eyes getting warmer. I can taste beef with too much mustard. No, spam. I can’t even remember what I’ve just had for lunch. Can’t I even hold on to the taste of something I’ve eaten only minutes before?

He steps forward and holds me. My warm eyes feel damp again. I try to rub them, but it’s difficult reaching around Daniel. ‘I’ve got spam,’ I say, ‘I opened it. I’m sorry, I should have saved it.’

Daniel snorts. Turns it into a noise like he’s clearing his throat. ‘Sorry. I think spam’s a funny word.’

‘Don’t be such an oddball,’ I say, but I smile. It always cheers me up when he says things like that. Even when he was small, he used to say the strangest things. David would try to be stern but he always wound up laughing.

‘Spam,’ he says, and rubs my back. ‘Spam, spam, spam. Where does it come from?’

‘The end of the world,’ I say, without managing to stop myself.

‘Spam comes from the end of the world?’ Daniel pulls away now. ‘I thought it was just pig in a can.’ He pats me on the shoulder. ‘Just meat, Mum. Normal meat.’ Although he says this, he still picks up the sandwich and sniffs it. Pulls a face. ‘Shall we stop talking about sandwiches? Especially ones where the ham isn’t real.’

‘It is real,’ I say, ‘it just comes from a tin.’

‘How do you know it’s ham?’ says Daniel. ‘It could be any other kind of animal. I read somewhere that people taste like pork, you know.’

‘Don’t make me feel sick,’ I say.

‘I’m sorry.’ I must have sounded like I meant it. I was never as funny as him. Could never get the tone right.

‘It’s all right.’ This time I go to hug him. ‘Did you want some spam? I could make you a sandwich?’

I can almost feel him grimace. ‘I’ll just have some bread, I think. Cup of tea, maybe. I’ve got the day off.’

‘The day off?’ I pull away. ‘Why?’

‘I went to work this morning,’ he says, ‘and Uncle John told me to go home. Said he probably shouldn’t, with the re-fits and all, but, well.’

‘He thought I’d need looking after.’ I set about filling the kettle. ‘He thought I’d be too sad to keep going with my day. Well, the shop has been open all morning. Yes, I did decide to close at lunch, but that’s not entirely strange, even on a Saturday.’ I sound angrier than I mean to.

‘Mum, he was just thinking of you,’ he says, ‘and me, to be honest.’ My cousin John had always been so good to Daniel, making sure he got the job in Little

Griff's little yard, ready for the navy to re-open theirs when the war happened. Probably because he and Anna had never managed to have any children of their own. Well, none that...no. That doesn't need bringing up.

'Oh.' I put the kettle on the stove. David always liked the idea of the stove in the back room of the shop. 'A little place we can get away to,' he used to say. He didn't like the shop much at first, but I think it grew on him. Even if sometimes I'd find him sat here with Joe drinking tea when there was no-one keeping an eye out in the front.

'Do you think Joe knows?' I ask.

'Sarah's boy said they'd tell him,' says Daniel. 'That was yesterday.'

'How is Sarah's boy? Is he doing all right?'

'Better than his uncle.' Daniel laughs. 'Shouldn't laugh. But Dad always said Uncle Joe was never meant to work on the docks.'

'His heart was never in it,' I say. That was important. Joe needed his whole heart with what he was doing or nothing at all. It's just the way he is. 'Do you think-?'

Daniel puts a hand up. He's being the man of the house now. 'I'll go and see him later. You need to rest and look after yourself.' He grimaces. 'Maybe eat some more spam. However you need to deal with it. Don't worry about the shop.'

'I still need to live, Daniel,' I say.

'Maybe you, me, and Uncle Joe should spend the day somewhere. Have a picnic or something. Mr Parsons has got a couple of those day trips coming up. To the cliffs. What do you think?'

I'm not sure just the three of us have ever spent a whole day together without David. In fact, I know we haven't. 'Would you like to do that?'

Daniel nods. 'Yes. Yes I would. I think he'd like it too. Nothing too strenuous though, of course, what with his, you know.' He pats his right leg.

‘He would like it...and it would be right. He was and is your father’s best friend.’ Two boys hiding in the corner of a rugby club, one terrified and the other one laughing. ‘Did I ever tell you about the first time I met both of them?’

Daniel chuckles. ‘I don’t know. Did you?’

‘Don’t be cheeky! Let’s pretend you haven’t heard the story.’

‘What story?’ He winks and sits in the creaky chair.

‘It was a wedding,’ I begin. Then I talk about dancing.

Sunday, the world is still ending. So, I am thinking about the past. About the young man I met at that party. I say young man, he was seventeen, a little boy, really. He still is, if you look hard enough at him. I never thought it would be that way. When I’d looked at my parents, I never saw the person they used to be. They had always been grown-ups. But the man with the already-white beard standing at the top of the steps is still Joe. David’s best friend. Rugby club corner. Worried about a punch-up or something. Silly boys.

Joe. The way that he pressed my hand between his two soft hands early this morning and said ‘Rachel.’ My name, rushing gently in. The sound of the waves against the nest of rocks down below. Here, on a Westgate Chapel day trip, though Mr Parsons and the other ladies are still eating lunch at the Gov. A chapel, that same vicar.

‘Come on, Uncle Joe,’ says Daniel, and laughs. Just like that. Daniel could always laugh, no matter what had happened. His father’s gone, the world is ending, and Daniel is already six or seven steps down the path, laughing. Brave. Silly.

Joe beams back at him. ‘I’m just getting ready to count the steps.’

‘You know what’s going to happen,’ says Daniel, ‘you’ll lose count. You always lose count.’

‘I don’t lose count,’ says Joe, wagging his finger like a schoolmaster, ‘it’s the steps. I’ve told you.’

‘Of course it’s the steps,’ says Daniel, gently mocking. ‘It’s always the steps, right?’

‘Daniel Farley,’ says Joe, wheezing like someone a lot older as he begins his climb, ‘you must try counting the steps yourself sometime. They change. It’s this place.’ He waves his walking stick around. ‘It’s got something. It’s been touched.’ Joe does not look forty-seven. The last time the world ended, it did that – made thousands of young men into old men. Not quite overnight, but near enough. A thunderclap over a generation. No wonder Joe’s clung onto those funny old stories from a time before even our great-great-great-great grandfathers were born. Out of memory.

And Daniel knows the stories too. I’d told him, Joe had told him, even David, who felt magic was something you grew out of, had told him. But he still calls back ‘Tell me at the chapel!’ His voice echoes as he moves further down the steps into the gap between the cliffs. The wind is so strong here by the sea. When it blasts, and it does blast, it fills your ears. Makes them ring.

Joe looks over to me. ‘You can go first, if you like.’ He makes a show of wiggling his right foot over the next step. ‘I’m probably going to be a while getting down there.’ I see myself reaching out a hand to him, offering to hold onto his hand as we descend. We’ll go down together, I think. We’ll follow Daniel together.

A strong gust picks up the moment and carries it away, salt-encrusted. ‘Thank you, Joe,’ I say, and step in front of him.

Chapter Two

I don't bother counting the steps. Outside the chapel, we are protected from the wind by the surrounding cliff and rocks. The crashing waves are muffled too, crackling like a radio searching for its channel. Desperate for a signal. I can smell the little cell inside from its open doorframe. Damp, old, the wetness of the years in a place that never dries.

'Smells like piss,' says Daniel, popping his head out of the door. I'm sure he said something like that when he brought him down here as a six year-old. He might not have said piss, though.

'Language,' I say, trying not to laugh. 'You're a docker, but you don't have to swear like one. Especially with your mother.' He smiles and disappears inside again. He's still a little boy. My eyes are warm and wet. The only reason he didn't have to go and fight was that job at the docks. Thank you David, for that.

'Smells like,' says Joe, arriving behind me. He doesn't quite finish his sentence as he catches my eye. 'Old water.' I don't break my gaze. 'All right then, urine.'

'Daniel said piss, I think.'

Joe leans against a tall rock. 'David would have said piss as well.' He coughs and takes out his pipe. 'While we're out of the wind,' he mutters, concentrating on packing his tobacco in. I lean against another rock opposite him, both of us not quite ready to enter the chapel.

'I haven't seen you smoke that pipe in a long time,' I say.

'I feel like it more now I'm an old man. Suits me.' He laughs at the same time as a wave roars distantly. The sounds mesh, like a rhyme, a harmony in a hymn.

'You're forty-seven,' I say. 'Not an old man.'

'Rachel, my beard is white.'

'More of a grey. Maybe white on a day like this, when it's bright.'

The laugh again. 'How about that? Perhaps age is just a trick of the light after all.'

I think about how I'd seen him as a young man earlier. How easy it was to see Daniel as a six year-old exploring the chapel. 'Maybe it is.'

Joe coughs. It sounds a bit wet. I must have grimaced slightly because he looks at me apologetically, before taking another puff on the pipe. 'Sorry,' he says, breathing the plume of smoke out, 'it tends to loosen up when I smoke.' Now he grimaces. 'That was a revolting thing to say.'

'It's all right,' I say, 'I don't mind.' David used to cough in a very similar way. Dry in the morning, looser in the evening. I suppose when you sleep, the whole of you stops and dries out. I shiver. David's plane was shot down. The sea rushes, the same sea that's holding my husband now. Wet, not dry. Under the weight of those foaming green waves.

'Rachel?' Joe is closer now. I'm surprised at the speed he moved across the few steps between us. He opens his arms to embrace me, appears to think better of it. Puts a hand on my shoulder.

'It's nothing,' I sniff, wiping my eyes. When did I start crying? 'I was just thinking. About the sea and how I won't...' I hug him. I'm a little angry now, just a little, that I had to be the first to move into the hug. Past be damned, we both need to hold each other. 'I won't get to bury him.'

'I know.' His grip tightens. 'I know. I wish there was something I could do.'

The sea rushes and gargles. Laughs.

By the time we've walked through the chapel, small and damp and dark, and headed out the door the other side, Daniel has scrambled across the rocks to the big crack in the cliffs, tunneling through to the water. There's a smaller cleft in the rock, the other side of the chapel, where the saint apparently hid from pirates. His ribcage scarred the rock. The larger crack across the little inlet has always looked like a

distraction – something to ward off false pilgrims. Daniel's looking up at this bigger scar, his back turned to us. 'Daniel!' shouts Joe, surprising me, 'don't go climbing in there, now!'

Daniel looks back and says something. Laughs. Whatever it is, it's too quiet to hear over the wind, now that we're fully exposed. His words stolen in a rush of air. I look at Joe, who's chuckling, but I don't know if he heard either. 'That boy's a lot like David,' he says, and hobbles across to a large rock before I can reply. He breathes in and closes his eyes. Is he thinking about it? It was stupid of us both to give in like that. If only I hadn't married his best friend.

This is the wrong day to think about that. I take a seat next to Joe. The rock is cold and hard on my bottom. 'Funny, really. There was always that distance between them.'

Joe's eyes are still closed, but he's wincing slightly. He inhales deeply, exhales, and replies. 'Really?'

'You must have noticed,' I say. 'Daniel's always been...odd. Likes to make people laugh.'

'David made a lot of people laugh,' says Joe. 'Especially me. You know that.'

'You were his best friend,' I say, 'of course he did.'

'I was his best friend,' he says, before looking directly at me, 'and his worst friend. But here we are.'

'Here we are?'

He hesitates. 'The wrong word.' He sniffs. 'I was going to say the wrong word for today. Probably the wrong word forever.'

'Well,' I say, 'I've got to know now.'

'Survivors.' Whoosh. Waves. 'We made it this far, and now we have to keep going.' He pats his leg. A noise like 'thunk'. Wood. 'Damned hard, though.'

‘Damned hard,’ I say. ‘Damned.’ I shuffle a little closer to Joe. ‘This is probably a daft question. It doesn’t feel like it, but it probably is.’

‘Go on. I’m always keen on the daft questions.’

‘Do you think we’ll live through this?’

He looks confused. ‘Live through what?’

‘The war. Didn’t you see the Dock last month? All that fire. Those German planes bringing it to our door. I could see it from Pembroke.’ I squint out at Daniel, or try to. He’s disappeared. ‘I wake up thinking “I’ll die today”, most days.’

‘Rachel.’ He says my name in that way again. ‘Rachel, that’s a dreadful thing to think.’

‘I’m worried that I might.’ Whoosh.

‘The fire never reached here, did it?’ Joe sweeps one arm across the inlet. ‘I mean, yes, it’s because we’re miles away from the Dock. But this church, this bay – these things are going to be here when the war ends. They will be here when we’re not. You’ve only got to look at it, to know Govan’s chapel is going to stand forever.’

‘Nothing lasts forever.’

‘Maybe.’ He stands up. ‘But I’m all in favour of being surprised.’ He squeezes my shoulder, and starts limping towards the big crack Daniel disappeared into, even though he must know crossing the rocks will be impossible with his leg. ‘Daniel!’ he shouts, as a surprise breeze picks up. ‘Where are you, son?’

I shiver.

I’m waiting at the top of the steps. I can hear Daniel chatting away to Joe as he walks up at his pace with him. Thick as thieves. I remember when they first met. Joe came to take David to the pub – “wet the baby’s head”, or whatever they said – and David had to go to the toilet before they left. When he left the room, I asked Joe if he

wanted to hold our son, whose arrival was so delayed by childish awkwardness and then war and injury and love. Our son. Mine and David's son, I mean. That's what I meant at the time.

'One of the first things I remember,' says Daniel as they reach the top, 'is you telling me about the pirates. You know the story.'

'Ah, the stone bell,' says Joe, 'Govan had this bell and it was silver, see, and these pirates wanted it. They took it and Govan prayed for it to be returned. Sure enough, the heavens did just that and turned it into stone.'

'But he could still make it ring,' I said, 'to call people to the chapel. We all know it, Joe. But the next part of the story is horrible.'

'Can't be ignored, though,' says Daniel. 'Hold on, before we go to the little beach. I want to wait and see if I can hear the bell on the wind.' He closes his eyes and Joe and I look at each other before doing the same. At first, I can only focus on the whoosh. It seems to have been in my ear since we got here. Maybe even before that. But I hear something else and smile to myself. Seagulls squawking in the distance. They're crying for something. It sounds desperate.

'The next part of the story, though,' says Joe. I open my eyes. His are still closed. 'That almost ruined it for me. The pirates came back.'

'They really wanted that bell,' says Daniel. His eyes are still closed, too. The pirates he's imagining are probably the same ones I am, with big floppy hats and frilly shirts and cutlasses. 'But they couldn't have it. They thought they could make Govan undo the miracle.' He's frowning now. I look out at the sea. It looks like a mass of corrugated iron shined to perfection. Wobbling, dancing tin.

'They put children from the nearby village in a cave and said they'd let them drown if Govan didn't give them the bell.' I kept looking at the sea as I said this. 'Those poor children.'

'Heaven didn't save them.' Joe is looking at his bad leg. Then he says the thing I've been thinking, and feel ashamed for. 'God's work is mysterious, yes. And

sometimes, it's downright rotten.' I want to move him away from the edge of the cliff. It sounds silly, really. It's not as though God will strike him down for saying something like that. But He let those children drown for a trinket, and He let David die too. It's not that God doesn't exist, I think to myself. It's worse. I think He does and He doesn't care. He probably left it up to some angel or other to decide what to do with that stone bell. Just ministries upon ministries cleaning up after each other.

'Come away from the edge, Mum,' says Daniel, grasping my arm firmly. I look down. I've walked a couple of steps towards the thin, brittle air. The drop. 'Let's go to the Little Beach. Have some sandwiches. Bit of lunch, eh?'

Chapter Three

The Little Beach had always been the Little Beach to us, even though it was Newquay Beach on some – but not all – maps. I remember my parents taking me out with my cousins, John and Francis, back when we were children, and they might have called it by its real name once or twice, but it was a beach and it was little. Down a steep cliff path, there was a layer of sand, followed by a deep dent in the beach filled with water, followed by more sand, and then the sea. There was a small path around the water in the middle, but the boys had always jumped straight into it.

It looked a lot bigger then, I think, standing at the edge of it. The word ‘river’ had been in my mouth when I thought about my childhood. Now it looks more like a puddle, the tide’s leftovers. The seagulls are still screaming overhead.

‘Shall we sit down here,’ says Daniel, holding up the basket, ‘where it’s less soggy?’

Joe is busy looking at the sky, so I decide to answer. ‘Yes. Here is probably best.’

‘When was the last time we came down here?’ says Daniel, unfolding the blanket from the top of the basket. Was that David’s mother’s basket originally? It seems like it’s an important basket. Lord, when did such silly things start getting so important?

‘Years ago,’ I say, remembering when David and I had brought him here when he was, what? Thirteen? Must have been. But I’m also thinking about that big family picnic here, an even longer time ago. There’s always so much food in these stories. Not good food, not fancy food, but it’s there and it is meticulous. We live lives of endless menus. A beef sandwich, a first dance. A spam sandwich, a last goodbye. It’s never a proper meal.

‘Do you want a sandwich, Mum?’ asks Daniel.

‘No,’ I said, feeling myself making a face, ‘I think I’ll have an apple. I’ve gone off sandwiches.’

‘I packed some spam ones,’ says Daniel. Joe makes a noise of disgust, the first sound he’s made since we actually got on the beach. ‘How long since you came down here, Uncle Joe?’

‘Ooh, years,’ says Joe. ‘I think your mother was there.’ He gives me this sideways look and the face beneath the beard is smiling as a young man again. When he looks like that, I wonder if he grew it just to hide how young he’ll always be. As if he’s just pretending to be a grown-up. ‘Do you remember that, Rachel? The picnic?’

‘I’ve been on a few picnics down here,’ I say, although I know exactly the one he means. After everyone came home from the war. Well, not everyone. I swallow. ‘We all had a little party. Daniel, of course, this was a long time before you.’

‘Can’t have been that long,’ says Daniel. ‘You married Dad, what, in...1920? ‘21?’

“21.’ Joe smiles with his mouth, but not his eyes. ‘It would have been 1921. After...’ He gently taps his bad leg.

‘You were the best man, weren’t you, Uncle Joe?’ Daniel stands, dusting sand off his knees. He’s grinning eagerly, wanting to hear his family history. We all want to know where we came from. It’s how we work out where we’re going.

I think I can hear seabirds again. Something crying out in the sky, or out to sea. Daniel looks around. As if he knows not to ask about the wedding further, he squints into the sky. ‘I can hear gulls, but I can’t see them.’

‘Unusual this time of year,’ says Joe. ‘Should be lots of young ones learning to fly.’

‘Maybe it’s just where we are,’ I say. ‘I mean, this is the bottom of a cliff. The birds are all higher up.’

‘Probably,’ says Daniel. It is odd though. The sound without the sight. As if there’s something half-formed struggling to get through to us. Without so many rocks, the sea here goes ‘flussh’ rather than ‘whoosh’. It’s always felt calm down on the Little Beach.

‘It feels too calm,’ says Joe. I look at him open-mouthed, and he looks in surprise back. ‘What? What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ I say, ‘it’s just that...well, you said exactly what I was thinking.’

He taps the side of his head. A smug look briefly crosses his face, though he looks apologetic almost immediately. ‘I mean,’ he said, ‘we’ve known each other for such a long time. It’s no wonder we were thinking the same thing.’

The distant bird chatter, which seems to have got louder in the last few moments, is interrupted by a distinct sound. It’s high-pitched and musical, and it’s impossible to tell which direction it’s coming from. It’s the sound of a bell. Not a little bell, but a larger and louder one. Ringing for a congregation of seagulls and forgotten families.

I turn around to see if the other two heard it too. But Joe is looking out to sea and Daniel is bending down to straighten a corner of the blanket. ‘Did you hear that?’ I say.

‘Hear what?’ says Daniel.

‘That sound,’ I say, ‘a bell ringing. Must have been...’ I look out across the gap between the cliffs, not really expecting to see the thing I’m about to see. ‘A boat. I mean, it had to be a boat.’ The two of them look at me as if I’ve announced I’m going to start Morris dancing. Maybe I should have a sandwich after all. I feel light-headed, so I decide to sit down on the blanket with Daniel. He puts his arm around me and gently squeezes my shoulder.

‘Good to see you sitting down, relaxing,’ he says. Joe looks at me and half-smiles, hauling himself to his feet. He strolls a few paces forward, his eyes fixed on the horizon. The sea is so very green today, matching its grassy cliff collars and seaweed cuffs. Odd. I could have sworn I heard Joe saying that, but his mouth didn’t move. ‘Mum,’ says Daniel, this time very quietly to me, ‘is Uncle Joe all right?’

‘He’s fine,’ I say, ‘you know what Joe’s like.’

‘My next question then,’ he says, ‘is everything all right with you and Uncle Joe?’ He keeps talking before I have the chance to answer. ‘It’s just that the two of you seem...awkward. Now that Dad’s...’ He clears his throat. ‘Now that Dad’s gone.’

‘It’s hard when someone goes.’ I don’t quite get the last word out in full. Why can we hold it together until the very end of the sentence? ‘It makes you think about how you know people. About how important they are to you.’

‘Joe’s obviously important,’ says Daniel, ‘he was Dad’s best friend.’

‘He was,’ I say, ‘and he always will be. We all go back a long way. You know that we all met on the same night.’ I say this, even though we though we talked it through the other night. Or was it last night? Repeat the history, repeat the stories. Pass yourself on.

‘When Uncle John married Aunt Anna. Dad was a terrible dancer.’

‘At least I saw him dancing.’ I laugh, looking out at Joe. He’d been so terrified of looking like he was having fun that night. What were he and David doing? They’d been hiding from someone, or something. There had been a punch-up. Not even the same night. They were hidden, not very well. ‘Joe didn’t really dance. The music was a little strange, I suppose.’

‘What was it like?’

‘Sort of...’ I stop, my eyes lingering on a tiny cave near the tide-line. ‘Fast and...it was jazz.’ I feel the weight of Daniel’s arm on my shoulders. The distant chatter of the gulls is ringing somewhere. No, ringing’s not the right word. ‘The music that night was jazz.’

‘Jazz at a wedding, eh? That’s so unusual.’ Daniel laughs. ‘Only in our family, right? No, only in Pembroke.’ But I’m thinking about it. Nobody around here played jazz then, especially not like that. Nobody really did now. It was like the mad old pianist – Gareth, I think he was called – knew something we didn’t.

‘You don’t know an old man called Gareth down the pub, do you, Daniel?’ I ask. It seems like a daft question, but as Joe always said, sometimes you just have to ask the daft questions.

Daniel frowns, thinking, but before he can answer Joe calls to us.

‘You two!’ he says. ‘I think I can see a puffin!’

‘We’ll come and have a look now!’ I call back.

‘Do we get puffins here?’ asks Daniel, smirking.

‘Out on Skomer Island,’ I say, ‘not round here though.’

‘I’ve never been there.’

‘Me neither.’ I stand up again. ‘I don’t think I’ve even been out to Caldey Island either. Just heard of it.’

‘Me and the boys took a boat out to Caldey last summer,’ says Daniel. ‘Beautiful monastery out there. It’s like...’ He squints in the afternoon sunlight. ‘It’s like being somewhere else. Not Pembrokeshire, you know? Another country.’

I nod. I’m about to say something else when I hear the clang of a bell again. This time, Daniel looks up too. ‘Did you hear it?’ I say.

‘Must have been a boat,’ he says, standing and looking out to sea. ‘Somewhere far out. I mean, it sounded far away.’

I know it sounded closer. ‘Must have been,’ I say.

Joe strolls back over. He’s lighting his pipe again. ‘It wasn’t a puffin,’ he says, ‘but there’s some strange birds somewhere out there. They don’t sound like seagulls.’ He pauses to puff on the pipe. ‘You know,’ he says, looking directly at Daniel, ‘your father told me about the first time he ever smoked a pipe. Well, he told me twice.’ He chuckled. ‘The first time was on the day his sister got married, when we first met Rachel, ah, your mother.’

‘What did he say about it?’ says Daniel, smirking. Joe’s stories often had a punch line, and Daniel was expecting it.

‘He said it was wonderful and far better than the cigarettes we’d been rolling as boys. Which I thought sounded about right, as those were just awful. Anything would have been better. He said he’d smoked with his father outside the church-’

‘St Mary’s?’ asks Daniel.

‘No no,’ says Joe, ‘the Westgate Chapel. Methodists, see, in your mother’s family.’

I shrug. ‘I never really looked too deeply into it. Same God. Not even a different book.’

‘And all of it probably quite a distance from what Govan,’ says Joe, waving his arm vaguely towards the sea, although sounding more and more like he’s preaching himself, ‘would have taught us. But I was talking about pipe-smoking, wasn’t I?’

‘Yes,’ says Daniel.

‘So, the first time your father told me he’d smoked a pipe, he said he liked it rather a lot. But then,’ he says, pausing briefly to keep his pipe alight, ‘I didn’t often see him smoking one again. He had one, and he used to pick it up around his Dad sometimes, but not usually. Then, a fairly short time that felt like a very long time later, we were standing here-’ I know where this is going, back in time to that day after the war. Again. ‘Right here on this beach. I started smoking, as I had done whenever I could in the trenches. To taste tobacco and smell it with the sea breeze was wonderful, Daniel. When compared with filling my throat with smoke in that grassy, muddy trench smell. It was...like playing football after school, rather than in your break at school.’

Daniel looks a little mystified. ‘But Dad was with you smoking?’

‘Ah,’ says Joe, ‘you keep me on track. Good lad. So we were here, and I lit my pipe. I’d been thinking about smoking on the beach throughout the war. Not this one, I’m afraid – it was always Barafundle in my head. But I decided I wanted to

share this wonderful thing with David.’ He stopped and looked from the sea to me and back. ‘But he just laughed and said that pipe tobacco always made him retch. And reek, if I remember his words correctly.’

‘Why did he say he liked it for so long?’ asks Daniel.

‘Because he was a boy at his sister’s wedding, and boys try very hard to be men. But then we saw something that was more important than who we were trying to be anyway.’ I can see Daniel looking at Joe’s leg. It’s not often that he talks about that, not properly.

‘I...I wish I could go and fight,’ says Daniel. I know he’s lying.

‘Your place is here, son,’ says Joe, ‘on the docks. There’s not many jobs they let you stay here to do, and I’m very glad your line of work is one of them.’ His voice is firmer than I’ve heard it in years. ‘For all of our sakes,’ he adds, looking at me.

‘Maybe,’ says Daniel, fidgeting. I remember the relief on his face when the letters went out, saying the dockworkers were to stay here rather than join up, and I remember how happy I was too. Maybe it’s selfish, but I’m glad I got to keep my son. Thank God for reserved occupations. ‘Tell me more about Dad. On that day.’

‘Well,’ says Joe, laughing, ‘it was a long time ago now. We drank ale that was a thousand times better than what we’d been drinking for a couple of years. We had the luxury of sandwiches, of course. We had my own Dad, telling stories. Your Dad liked that. He sat down like a boy again, and listened to my Dad telling his tales.’

‘What tales?’

‘Oh, all sorts,’ says Joe.

‘He thought all of these things about St Govan,’ I say, remembering Niall. ‘About how he used to be knight before he was a priest.’

Joe nods. ‘He used to fight for King Arthur, or at least that’s what Dad used to say.’

‘I wonder how he wound up here,’ says Daniel. ‘It’s not exactly near...’ He stops to think of the word. ‘Camelot. Is it?’

‘Where’s Camelot?’ says Joe. ‘In someone else’s dream a long time ago. But here is where Govan came. He must have thought the place needed God.’ The bird chatter sounds less like distant laughter now. It’s more like crying. Joe closes his eyes, takes a deep gulp of sea air. ‘If he did, he must have been a bit mad. This place is heavenly.’

None of us speak for the moment, and I wonder if both of them have picked up on the odd birdsong too. ‘I never really knew Dad enjoyed stories like that so much,’ says Daniel.

‘Oh, everyone likes stories. Always have done, since the beginning of time. It’s one of the reasons why we have history, and one of the reasons why that history is so mixed up. Get enough people telling the same story and before too long it’s not the same story at all. Lots of Gods, same one God.’ Joe stops to puff on his pipe. ‘But we were talking about your Dad.’

*

The sun’s dropped a little, and the sand is cool now. Maybe that’s why it feels grittier. I push my bare feet into it, enjoying the texture of deeper, damper grains on my toes, and glance across to the little cave, which the tide has just reached, rolling in with that same gentle song. Daniel is wandering around the rock pools near to the cave, his trousers turned up.

Joe must have been asleep for an hour or so now. I wonder what time it is. The tide seems to have come in very quickly. I think about creeping back over to the dozing Joe and slipping his watch out of his waistcoat pocket, but stop myself. Rifling through his clothes while he’s asleep seems...inappropriate.

But I do walk back to him. I sit down and listen to his snoring, close my eyes and feel my hands and feet turning numb. I'm falling asleep, too. The slowly disappearing sunlight has left behind a ghost of warmth that the sounds of snoring and waves are gathering around me. I lie back on the blanket. The snoring, the waves, the birds...the snoring, the waves, the crying birds...the snoring, the waves, Daniel crying, a bell ringing...

I wake up with a start, my head jerking up. Joe, next to me still, is up too. 'Did you hear that?'

'Hear what?' I say, to check that we both heard the same thing. That bell again.

'A child crying,' says Joe, hauling himself up and groaning with the effort.

'Oh,' I say, 'I mean, I thought I did. But it's probably just the birds.'

But he's already scrabbling to his feet, his face strained with the pain of trying to move his bad leg so quickly. 'It's close,' he says, panic in his voice.

I stand up too, to help him. There is definitely a distant sound of crying now. 'Where's Daniel?' I say. 'Where could he have got to?'

'Daniel?!' shouts Joe, surprising me. 'Where is he?'

'Joe, calm down,' I say, even though I feel panicky too.

'Sorry,' he mutters, before taking a deep breath. 'I fell asleep...I don't remember what I was dreaming about, but I think I haven't quite got out of it yet. As if it was...'

'Like a hangover,' I say. 'Everyone gets that from time to time.' I touch his elbow. 'But Daniel's bound to be somewhere around here. He's a grown man, our...' I nearly break the spell. 'He's a grown man.'

'Yes,' says Joe, 'yes, he is. I can still hear that crying sound.' He looks over to the little cave. 'Not to...it doesn't matter. But I think it's coming from in there.'

‘Really?’ I say. It does seem to be carrying on the breeze – which has picked up – from that direction.

‘It’s either coming from there or out to sea. Good ears, trust me,’ he says, tweaking at his ears and looking more like himself again. ‘Come on.’

Before I can reply, he’s marching towards the cave. He’s easy to catch up to, but I feel hesitant and I don’t know why. ‘Joe,’ I say, ‘please. We don’t have to go in there.’ I put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Not again.’

He stops and looks at me, half-smiling. ‘It couldn’t be helped last time, and...come on.’ The sound of something crying is louder now that we’re nearer. The tide is right up by the cave. ‘We might get wet feet,’ he says, walking on. I sigh and follow. I want to think that this is just Joe trying to get at an old memory. I want to imagine that he’s trying to awaken something dirty, from that party after he and David came back. The bad thing. But I know that Joe’s not like that.

He stops by the entrance and looks around. ‘Daniel?!’ he calls again. I take the remaining steps across the sand, glad that I took my shoes off earlier as the cold sea tickles my feet.

‘That’s not him in there,’ I say, ‘it sounds like something else.’ I peer into the darkness, so different to the August sunlight. The sound is clearer now. Definitely children crying. I open my mouth to say this, but I’m cut off by the sound of the bell.

‘What was that?’ says Joe, startled.

‘You heard it this time?’

‘What do you mean, this time?’

‘I mean,’ I say, ‘I’ve heard that bell a few times this afternoon. But you and Daniel didn’t. I thought...’ I shake my head.

Joe grimaces a little. ‘Come on.’ As he steps into the cave, the sea pushes a puddle forward over my feet. I suck the air in through my teeth, and bending my head slightly, join him.

I blink a few times to adjust my eyes to the darkness. I feel Joe's fingers between mine. The last time we held hands was twenty years ago. And probably in the same place. We shuffle along the narrow stone passage, slowly. 'The crying,' says Joe, 'it's stopped.'

'Whoever was making the noise,' I say, 'they have to be in here. It's more worrying that they've stopped.' As we move further in, I run my hand along the cold, damp stone of the wall. The water shlops distantly outside. 'This cave seems deeper than...' I take a deep breath. I hear Joe do the same. 'Than last time.'

He stops and I feel him put his hand on the small of my back. 'Did David know?'

'No.' I don't think he ever even suspected. And I didn't even feel guilty for long. What would be the point? It was a strange time. We were lucky to be alive. You can love two people at the same time. It might sound selfish now. But I accept this. We are here.

'Rachel,' he says, 'I know today isn't the best...it's not the best place to talk about this. In a cave, I mean.'

I squeeze his hand. 'We never knew about Daniel. I mean...' I'm going to break the spell. If we're all going to die soon, if these are the last days we're living in, then why not? 'If he is your son or not.' There is a screech from the darkness. Joe sets off, tugging me along as the water rushes. It sounds quicker and thicker and deeper now and my feet are wet. 'Joe,' I say, 'the tide.'

'We can't leave them, whoever they are,' he says. 'How deep is this place? It's more of a tunnel than I remember. Hello?' he calls. 'Hello? We're coming to help.' There is a whimper. I turn my head back to look at the cave's entrance. It's a distant pin-prick of light.

'It wasn't this deep,' I say again, 'not last time.' That party. David had fallen asleep. Joe had taken me to the water's edge to look at stars. We had too much to drink. Followed something into the cave. This cave. 'Not last time,' I say, again.

But Joe's not listening. Each step is a loud splash now. 'We're coming to help! Can't be much further.'

'Joe, I'm scared. The tide is coming in fast.' It doesn't feel right. The cave shouldn't be this long. The water shouldn't be this deep. 'Joe, we have to get out of here.'

'Can't be much further,' he says again. I can feel water almost up to my knees, my skirt being weighed down. 'We've got to be close now.'

I pull my hand free from his. All I can hear is the water slapping on the rock. 'We have to go. There's no-one here.'

'Then who was crying?'

'Joe, I don't know how well you can swim with your leg.' I turn around and start splashing back to the light. 'But whatever you think you heard can wait. Maybe forever.'

'But you heard it too!'

I stop. 'I don't know what I heard. But nobody called back when you asked.'

'There's definitely someone down here,' he says. 'Just stop and listen.'

Against all the fear I'm feeling – and there's so much of that – I stop myself from answering him. There is something still making a noise behind the watery sounds. I feel like I shouldn't be listening though. Guilty. I think of jazz. 'Let's leave, Joe.'

'What I think this is,' he says, 'is...someone's child or...I don't know...has come exploring down here, and maybe they're hurt and that's why they need our help...or...'

'There was no-one else on the beach,' I say. 'No-one was looking for a missing child. I think we heard something, yes, but...we have to leave it.' I hold out my hand. 'Now.'

‘Where’s our son, Rachel?’ asks Joe.

‘He’s somewhere out there,’ I say, sweeping my hand towards the light. It’s an odd thing for Joe to ask at this moment, I know. But we are here. The water is almost up to my knees. I am thinking of the children trapped in a cave to drown in the name of a stone bell. ‘Please, Joe.’

I hear him breathing in, deeply, and then-

Chapter Four

'You two haven't fallen asleep, have you?' Daniel blocked out the sun. I felt a headache spreading to my eyes.

'You're here,' says Joe, next to me. He's looking up in surprise too. He looks at me too. 'You're here,' he says, though this time to me.

'Of course I am,' says Daniel, 'I only went to wander the cliff path.'

'How long...how long have we...what time is it?' I ask.

'Four o'clock,' says Daniel. 'I don't know how long you've been asleep for.'

'I had a strange dream,' says Joe, still looking at me.

'Well, it can't have been a long dream,' says Daniel, pointing up the cliff above the right side of the beach. Above the cave. 'I looked over the edge there when I was coming back and you two were nowhere to be seen.'

'What do you mean?' I say.

'I thought you'd started walking back,' he says. 'I only came down here to go look in that cave.'

'What cave?' says Joe. 'The one down there?' He points to where the cave should be, below the dip in the sloping beach, but the tide has come up so high that it can only just be made out.

'Not much chance of it now,' says Daniel. 'Maybe next time, eh? You must have come back from wherever and gone to sleep in about...' He takes out his watch. It used to be David's, but he left it here for Daniel. Just in case...I stop thinking about the watch. Time ticking by. 'Ten minutes. Where were you?'

'I feel like we were longer,' says Joe, groaning as he hauls himself up. 'Asleep for longer, I mean. We went to go and look in the cave, didn't we, Rachel?'

I feel a little sick. I remembered us going into that cave and it filling with water, very quickly. We must have waded out and come back up here and...sat down to dry off? 'I thought we did.' I can feel tears in my eyes.

'We must have. Daniel, my boy, it's been a very long day and I've walked around more than I normally would in a week. Shall we start heading back to catch up with Mr Parsons? The coach leaves around four. Might even be time for a half at the Inn.'

My appetite has gone. I think I might've over-eaten today. Or was it yesterday? There's a lot of sticky, thick weight in that spam. I look at the piece of toast and feel terrible for not wanting to put it anywhere near my mouth. I look into the fire and sip my tea instead. The taste is rusty, brown. Old – the flavour of a fixed point.

'Rachel?' Joe comes back into the room. He unbuttons his jacket and puts it on the back of the chair. 'Cold out there tonight, considering.'

'Considering what?' I'm sat so close to the fire that it's hard to remember what cold feels like.

'That it's September.' He doesn't sit back down in his own chair. Instead, he puts a hand on my shoulder. 'You should eat that toast.'

'I don't feel like it.' Here, in the house, with the letter still on the kitchen table, is what waking up is. We haven't talked about what happened on the beach yet – either this afternoon or twenty years ago.

Joe shuffles back to his chair and lowers himself with a grunt. 'You hardly ate anything from the picnic. Come on, before it goes cold.'

I laugh. 'I'm not a child, Joe.'

He laughs too and for a moment it all doesn't feel so horrid. 'I suppose I talk to everyone as if they're children,' he says, 'having never had...' He looks upwards. 'Daniel must have been so tired, going to bed this early.'

'He has to go back to work tomorrow.' I pick up the toast and take a bite, feeling a little sick. I spend extra time chewing it slowly to hold off swallowing, and it turns to mush in my mouth.

'I know, Rachel. Do you think we should tell him?'

I'm still chewing. I gulp down the mouthful and it feels like it takes a very long time. 'Do you?'

'How would we even start?'

'Maybe you could take him to the pub?'

'Would that make it better?'

'Well, you always spent so much time down there. He does, too...it just might be a good place. Lots of history. That's a certain kind of magic.'

Joe laughs at this. 'A crowd of old men telling you their life stories, even though they don't always make sense. I suppose it is a history, of sorts. I'm not sure it would help.'

I sigh. 'Do you want him to know?'

'Maybe. Yes. But he's probably too old to know now.'

'What do you mean?' I ask. I can already feel the answer unraveling in my head.

'This would never have been a question if David was...had come back. If we tell Daniel now, he'll have not only lost his father, but...well...he'll have lost his father.' Joe scratches his head. 'I mean, what if it plays on his mind? He might feel like we've taken his childhood away from him.'

‘He might hate me,’ I say, even though I can’t imagine that. Daniel has a gentle, forgiving love. He gets that from Joe. David loved me, but it was harder, stronger, stormier. ‘Or you.’

‘I think he’d feel more hurt than anything,’ he says. ‘Rachel, I know I’ve asked this before, but...David never knew?’

‘He never knew,’ I say. If I were him, I don’t think I’d have known either. It didn’t seem like something either Joe or I would do. I suppose sometimes you’re just drawn to someone. Doesn’t matter if it’s in your nature or not. Love has no rules, when you actually have a really good look at it. ‘He had no reason to ever suspect anything.’

‘It was wrong of us. But I’m glad it happened. Daniel is growing into a wonderful young man who David would be proud of.’ Joe sips his tea. ‘Maybe that’s the best reason to not tell him. Why shake his life up now?’

I nod. ‘We’ll keep our secret.’

‘Like a myth. Weaving into the history of your family.’

‘Our family,’ I say. We sit listening to the fire crackling for a few minutes. Joe had said it was cold earlier, but the evening chill wasn’t why I lit it. I certainly hadn’t felt cold. It just felt like the right thing to do, a habit I’d got into. I wrap my arms around my body, a self-embrace. My clothes feel very dry. ‘There’s another thing we have to talk about.’

‘Hmm?’ Joe had been nodding off.

‘Sorry.’ I wrap my arms tighter around myself. ‘But what happened in that cave. This afternoon, I mean. We can’t have just had the same dream.’

‘But we also can’t have even been in that cave. It was far too long and deep. It wasn’t real, Rachel.’

‘Then how do you explain it?’

‘We must have just had the same dream. We were both at the same place, remembering what had happened there, and-’

‘What about the sound of that child crying?’

‘-and we’d been talking about those old stories. But they are stories and only stories. There was no-one else on that beach. We were thinking of ghost stories, thinking of our past, and we both just happened to have reasonably similar dreams.’

I stare at him for a few moments. ‘But...really?’

‘Once you eliminate the impossible – which we must – then you are left only with the improbable.’

‘But I remember it,’ I say, ‘it felt real.’

‘Dreams often do.’ Joe runs his hands over his face, like he’s trying to wake himself. ‘Especially at the worst of times.’

‘How did your dream end?’

‘We were in the cave, and the water was coming in fast. And then...’

‘Then we woke up?’

‘Exactly. Don’t dreams always end when something terrible is about to happen?’ Joe smiles. ‘That’s just what happened.’

I don’t believe him. I’m not altogether sure he does, either. David always said that Joe couldn’t stop daydreaming, but I think what happened today was something else. Maybe I’ll feel different, a week or a month from today. We tell ourselves what the truth must be because the alternative doesn’t fit into the world. Sometimes you just have to leave the hole in things. I pick up the toast again and take another bite, this time chewing it quickly.

‘I know we’re not going to tell Daniel that you...that you are his father.’ I’ve never said it out loud before, but the words don’t seem so foreign as I’d thought. ‘But you are more than welcome around here any time, Joe. I want you here. My

cousin John is looking after him at work, and I know he's got friends. But he needs something solid in his closest family, and you can be that. Even if we never tell him why.'

'He's a smart boy,' says Joe, 'he might work it out on his own.'

'Well, we all have moments where we think myths are real. But we also know when to decide not to believe them. Stories like that are promises you keep. Even if he suspects something is between us...he won't want to break the spell.'

'I think you might be right.' Joe takes his watch out and looks at it. 'It's getting late, Rachel. It's going to be a cold walk home.'

I lean across the small table between us and slip my hands around his. I've got that feeling again, as if I'm doing something because it's a habit. As if it's the natural way. 'Stay. Stay a little longer.'

September 1973 – Coming Down Again

Chapter One

'The end of summer,' said Neil, 'is always such a bummer.' He threw his handful of bread at the ducks that had amassed along with a curious pair of swans. 'I know it's been a few years, but I always think of the summer holidays ending. Us having to go back to school.'

'Neil,' I said, laughing, 'you're always on your summer holidays.'

'I have a job in the ice cream van.'

'You had a job in an ice cream van, last year,' I said. Neil was one of my best friends, but he was a bit of a layabout. Or artist, if you prefer. He shook his head, his long brown hair wafting a little from side to side. He gave me the half-smile – always equal parts infuriating and endearing.

'Man, you just wouldn't understand. I need my time to be creative. I can't be held down to anything else or I'll lose my spark. I know what you're thinking: that sounds exactly like something a hippie would say.' He shrugged. 'I guess you'd be right, Seren.'

'Well, I can't really argue with that, can I? Joanna, no.' I put my hand on my daughter's shoulder. She looked up at me, grumpily, from the wall and shuffled back from the edge. She was always reaching out towards the swans in the Mill Pond. I think it was their long necks curling upwards. They fascinated her, stretching to meet her with their masked eyes.

'Come on Jojo,' said Neil, holding his hand out to her, 'these birds have had enough. Do you want to find some more?'

'Birds!' said Joanna, the grouch-face instantly disappearing in favour of the enormous grin she always had for Neil. 'Nee! Birds!'

'That's right,' he said, 'birds with Nee. Come on.' I loved how the two of them got on. I hadn't had so much time for Neil since getting married, so it was good to see that he could gel with the new important things in my life. Even if they insisted on calling him 'Nee'.

I lingered a moment to look across the pond and pushed my glasses up my nose. A heron was perched on a log across the other side. 'Neil,' I said, calling ahead, 'look at the heron. What's he thinking about?' I hurried to catch up with them, now feeding a couple of ducks further down.

'He's thinking that his life is perfect,' he said. 'He's thinking that the life of a heron is the very best. No ties, no job, just water and catching your own food. He's thinking he knows his place in the chain, and he is OK with that. What do you think Jojo? Do you want to grow up to a heron?'

She puffed her blonde fringe out of her eyes. It needed a trim. 'Helen!'

'No, Joanna.' I laughed. 'Not Helen. Heron.'

'Helen! Auntie Helen!' she said, then began singing the words 'Auntie Helen' to the tune of 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. She had really picked up on that hymn, plastering it to whatever words she was keen on that day.

'How is Helen these days?' said Neil. It was a nice thing for him to ask.

'She's doing well. You should come along for Sunday lunch some time after church. Or just come along to church!' I said the last bit with a smile. Of course Neil wouldn't want to come to church.

'Ha, you know me. The man of God,' he said, laughing too. 'I know I don't have to make my, uh, thoughts clear to you about me and the big man.' He points upwards.

'We have a good sing-song,' I said. 'Joanna loves it.'

'Do you like hearing all the stories about Jesus, Jojo?' Neil crouched down and ruffled her hair.

'Jesus!' she said, before breaking back into her 'All Things Auntie Helen' medley.

‘I’m not gonna tell you how to raise your daughter,’ said Neil, sighing. ‘I trust you more than that. But should you really be taking her to church? Isn’t it better that she learns her own spirit path?’

I couldn’t help laughing. ‘Spirit path? Christ, Neil.’

‘Don’t blaspheme! You know what I mean though. What does Steve think?’

I hesitated. Steve hadn’t been to church in some time. ‘Steve...has been thinking about other things. He’s not really been in the mood. I tried to get Dad to have a word with him about it, but they just got a bit drunk.’

‘Ha, I love your Dad,’ said Neil. ‘How is Dan the man?’

‘He’s in the prime of his life,’ I said. I meant it. My father was up jogging every morning, he had a group of mates, was as natural with Joanna as he was with me, if not more so. Daniel Farley was everyone’s best friend, no matter how crazy his stories were.

‘Knew he’d be a great old man,’ said Neil. ‘He had the twinkle, you know? When we were kids and he’d tell us about the war and stuff. About how lucky we were...we were always told we should feel lucky, in school and that, but he made me feel it without wanting to make me feel guilty too. Man, those were the days.’

I giggle, though I don’t mean it. Of course Neil thinks those were the days. They’re the past. Neil lives there most of the time. That’s what he means when he says he’s ‘a creative’. I haven’t seen any of his paintings hanging anywhere except his shed and a couple on my wall. ‘Oh, Neil. Any luck organising a show yet?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘For your paintings.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he says, running his fingers through his hair, ‘I’ve got, ah, all sorts on the go. Julie’s got this friend who does stuff at the community hall...’

Without thinking, I rolled my eyes. Panic set in at the look on his face. Thankfully, he looked down at Joanna and smiled back at me. 'Yeah, I know. I've got a friend of a friend of a friend, etc.'

'It's just...you're actually good, Neil. You should just approach people yourself. Maybe get other artists involved. If we can get the Rolling Stones to put on a show at the castle-' I felt my toes wiggling in excitement at the thought of this.

'Fuck yeah, the Stones!' He clapped a hand to his mouth and his eyes flicked down to Joanna, who thankfully was fully involved in singing a song to some ducks she was teasing with half a slice of bread. 'Maybe I'll meet them and get a deal to do some album covers or something. They'll be here scouting around, right?'

'I imagine they've got agents or something to do that for them,' I said.

'Yeah, yeah, you're right. But they'd at least stick around for a little holiday, wouldn't they? Stands to reason. This is such a beautiful place. Heavenly.'

'Have you ever wanted to go anywhere else though? We're almost thirty. I've never been to London, you know that?'

'Why would you want to? Lots of people bustling about. Smoke, pollution. Getting robbed on trains underground or hit by big red fu...flippin' buses on the road. London's a nightmare.'

'Have you ever been?'

'Well...no.' We both laugh. 'But this place is just...the beaches, man. The woods. The cliffs. The weird stuff! They say Carew Castle is haunted by a spectral chimpanzee. Ghost monkey!' He tickled Joanna, who'd been poking his knee. 'Raaagh, Jojo!'

'Go monkey!'

'I suppose.' I smiled for Joanna. 'The last few years haven't been kind though. There's almost no jobs down the Dock now.'

'There's shops and things down there.'

‘No, I mean, on the actual docks in the Dock. They aren’t even really docks anymore. Even the private boatyards are shutting up. Since Griffiths’ went under, especially...it’s not an easy place to live, Neil.’ Little Griff, a huge red-faced man with arms like tree trunks, had openly wept as he’d told his boys that they weren’t going to have jobs any more. Said he’d let them down, and his father, and his grandfather. Steve told me.

‘Nah,’ said Neil, before picking up Joanna. ‘Your mummy just needs to chill, Jojo? Am I right? Just appreciate that life is for living. If you work too hard, you miss it.’

I bit back anything snide, pushing it away as I pushed my glasses up my nose. Neil and I had known each other since primary school and I knew he meant well. But he didn’t have anyone depending on him. He lived with his parents and had his own shed to paint in. It was fine that it made him happy. He said it was all he needed. But I always felt happiness meant different things to different people. And Steve losing his job did not make me happy.

‘Well...oh! Look,’ I said, ‘these swans look very hungry, don’t they, Joanna?’

‘Hungry!’ said Joanna. ‘Down, Nee!’

‘All right, Jojo,’ he said, smiling at her, ‘if you behave yourself when you’re down there.’ She giggled as he popped her down. ‘Would you like a piece of bread from Mummy?’

I held out the packet. She dug her hand in and grabbed two slices, mashing them into a bread-y mess which she presented to Neil. ‘Nee!’

‘One for me? Thank you!’ He took half of the balled-up bread and she turned eagerly back to the pond. ‘Jojo’s so sweet, Seren. Whatever you’re doing, you’re doing it right. Don’t take any notice of this smelly hippie.’

‘Smelly!’ yelled Joanna, without looking back to us.

I laughed. 'Neil, aren't you ready to find someone to have children with yet? You've really got a knack for them. And you're not a smelly hippie. Maybe just a hippie.' He certainly didn't smell bad. Perhaps a little bit of coriander.

'Thanks, man. I needed to hear that. About the smell, I mean! Um, I don't really know. I mean, yeah, there's Julie. But...'

'But what? She seems...' I paused for slightly too long. 'Very nice.'

'You really don't sound convinced. Julie's, you know, a laugh. I like her a lot.'

'Is she your girlfriend?'

'Like, can we constrain ourselves to such shackling terms in this day and age? I mean, no disrespect to you and Steve. You guys have got to do what makes your spirit happy, even if it, ah, looks like the wrong thing. But Julie and I are more like...two stars close together. Like, we shine, but with distance between us.'

I very consciously raised my eyebrow. 'That sounds a bit silly, Neil. Are you sure you don't mean that neither of you is sure if you're right for each other? Because that's OK too.'

'No, you just...ah, you're probably right.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Maybe. Julie's just very keen on keeping her artistic credibility. I mean, she cares about mine too. You know, how we won't be as credible tied to each other because of the Western principles of monogamy. These are principles that we're fighting hard to deconstruct in the revolution.'

'What revolution? I thought the two of you sat around all day smoking funny fags.'

'Mumma!' Joanna tugged at my skirt. 'Ducks!' She pointed towards a larger group of swans further up the Mill Pond.

'Come on, Jojo,' said Neil. He took her hand, winked at me, and the two of them started down the path. He started singing the Beatles' 'Revolution', and she joined in, using her own child-words.

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‘There’s my girl!’ said Steve, lifting Joanna up and swinging her around. ‘Did you have a nice time with Mummy and Uncle Neil?’

‘Feeda ducks!’ she said.

‘You fed the ducks?’ He set her down, but kept his hands on her shoulders. His arms were stretched out, taut and muscular, his sleeveless vest showing off the biceps. I could see the tattoo on his left arm of the messy Celtic knot. He’d got it when the Navy boys were stationed in the Dock, on training, and he’d made friends with a group of them. They’d got drunk and one of them had done it with a needle and dark Indian ink. His mother was horrified, but I loved it. Seeing a non-sailor with a tattoo was so rare, and the knot – despite being painted into him by a pissed petty officer – was beautiful. Apparently, it meant eternity. Time without time.

‘Feeda ducks!’ she said again, then pointed at Neil, who stood looking sheepish in the doorway. ‘Nee!’

‘Neil was really good with her,’ I said.

‘Top man,’ said Steve, ruffling Joanna’s hair. She looked crossly at him. ‘Sorry love.’ She wriggled free from his hands and went into the living room. ‘When are you getting your hair cut then, boy bach?’ asked Steve, standing and grabbing Neil’s hand in a firm grip. He shook it roughly. ‘Great to see you again.’

‘Always a pleasure, Steve,’ said Neil, lifting Steve’s hand and kissing it daintily.

‘You bloody fairy,’ he said, wiping his hand off on his vest but laughing.

‘Were you on the way out?’ I asked.

‘Just to see if anyone’s about,’ he said. ‘Up the Oak.’

‘You haven’t had your tea yet.’ I looked through into the living room at the clock. ‘It’s not even half four.’

‘I’ll come back for my tea,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about that, love. Fancy a couple of pints, Neil?’

‘Not for me, thanks,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to get back to Julie.’

‘Say no more, mate. Be back in a bit.’ He kissed me on the cheek, then bustled past Neil, slapping him gently on the bottom as he went.

‘Well...that’s not very encouraging,’ I said.

‘Good to have friends, I suppose,’ said Neil.

‘He doesn’t know if any of his friends are going to be down there, Neil. He’s been doing this a few days a week for about a month now. It’s not good for him, just going to the pub and talking to anybody he finds.’

‘Shit,’ said Neil, quietly enough so that Joanna wouldn’t hear him from the other room. ‘What’s up with that?’

‘I think he’s got fed up of complaining to me. Or he thinks I’m tired of it. He just wants different people to moan to.’

‘Are you?’

‘Am I what?’

‘Are you tired of it?’

‘God, no,’ I said. ‘I mean, there’s not a lot I could do about it so maybe I don’t sound as caring as I did, but...there’s only so much you can say. I’ve told him my Dad’s always willing to have him on at the shop, but he says real men don’t work in shops. He says that’s what I do, and it suits me, and it wouldn’t suit him.’

‘Bummer.’

‘Can I ask you a personal question, Neil?’

‘Depends what it’s about,’ he said, holding up his hands. ‘I’m not answering anything about sex, drugs, or rock n’ roll.’

‘This is serious. How do you get by without a job? I mean, I know there’s signing on and you live with your parents and everything...but how do you stay happy? From day to day? And don’t say smoking dope.’

‘It definitely helps.’ He chuckles. ‘But, like, I dunno. I get up, I walk around. I create stuff – you know, painting. Been doing some sculpture. I play the guitar. Badly. Just enjoy myself. End each day having put something new into the world.’

‘That’s beautiful.’ I really thought it was. It was things like that, which kept him from being another lazy layabout hippie.

‘But, you know, maybe that’s just my nature, how I’ve always been. Steve’s nature is Steve’s nature, and that’s how he’s always been. All that firm handshake stuff.’

‘He feels like something’s missing because he’s always worked, you mean?’ It would make sense. Steve left school at fifteen and couldn’t wait to get to work.

‘And because that’s what he does. His nature. He works, or he did, his friends are all men who cripple each other with, like, handshakes and slaps on the back. He’s...a manly man. Hey, Jojo!’

I looked down. Joanna had crept up and was standing just next to me. ‘Manny man?’ she said.

‘A manny man, yes.’ Neil flexed his skinny arms like a circus strong man. ‘Grrr!’

‘Grrrrr!’ Joanna flexed too, before running away giggling.

‘Well, I’d better go,’ said Neil.

‘I thought that was just an excuse to not go to the pub,’ I said.

‘No, really, Julie’s expecting me. She wants to cover the garden in paper while we still have the weather, pour paint on it and roll around in it. Or something like that.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Because...art can be found.’ He leaned in and hugged me, speaking softly into my ear. ‘You just have to go looking for it. It’s a story you make up by accident. Hang a load of little pictures together to make one big one. Get naked and roll around. Art is there, man.’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ I said as he pulled away. ‘Sounds a bit like waffle.’

‘That’s what The Man wants you to think! I’ll see you around, Seren.’

‘The Man pays the bills, Neil. Come round for dinner with Julie sometime,’ I said, as he turned to the door.

‘I’ll have to persuade her! Julie says dinner is a construct of the restricted mind. Bye!’ He left, shutting out the late summer light.

I think Julie’s a construct of a load of old cow muck, I thought, as I watched him go. But I did love Neil. Not in any weird ‘could’ve been’ way – he was just my friend. Truly.

Chapter Two

I waited a little while to set the table for tea, as Steve had been getting back later and later, in spite of his promises to be home in time for tea. We were having a light tea, so I didn't have much to prepare. Sardines on toast and a bakewell tart for pudding. We had always had tea just before six, but it had gone six and I was still waiting for Steve. I sighed and put the cutlery on the table in the dining room. Before I laid out the plates, I got *Goat's Head Soup* out from the record box and put it on, keeping the volume low. The Rolling Stones have, I admit, always deserved to be blasted out loud, even in their quietest moments, but I didn't want Joanna growing up in a house where she thought annoying the neighbours was normal. And sometimes I worried that she might pick up on the lyrics, too, which weren't always what you might call savoury.

The sound of twangy guitar relaxed me as I got the nice plates out from the cupboard. It sounds silly, but I felt like tea should be served on the nice plates as often as possible. If we were only going to save them for a special occasion, then why have them?

As quiet as it was, I could easily pick out Mick Jagger's voice, his not-quite-there singing. Rock n' roll, or rock, or whatever they were calling it now, had a kind of magic, especially in its jazzier moments when it dared to veer close to the wrong notes. It promised that somewhere out there, other exciting things were happening and that we could be part of them. That's what I thought as I laid out the plates and fetched the butter dish from the kitchen. Then I thought about what Neil had said about finding art and chuckled to myself. 'I am a hippie at heart,' I said as I lifted the lid of the dish to check we had enough butter.

'Hippie!' I turned to see Joanna standing in the doorway, pointing at me.

'Hello, my love,' I said, picking her up and dancing gently. 'Nearly teatime now. Are you excited for tea?' I always tried to get her excited for the little things we should be grateful for, like my parents did for me. They'd lived through a war. They knew what the important things were.

‘Yes.’ I could see her winding down and tiring out. She said ‘yes’ as an absolute, no question in her voice. She looked down at the turntable. I’d left the sleeve of *Goat’s Head Soup* out and she squinted curiously at it.

‘What is it, Joanna?’ I picked her up and she buried her face in my shoulder. ‘What’s wrong?’ I gently lowered her down next to the turntable and picked up the sleeve. ‘Is it this?’

She pointed at the orange cover, the blurry face of Mick Jagger and his open mouth, and scowled, before hiding behind a chair. I laughed and she looked around and scowled at me too. ‘It’s OK, Jojo,’ I said, using Neil’s special name for her to calm her down. ‘It’s only Mick.’

She came out from her hiding place cautiously and prodded the sleeve. ‘Vick?’

‘Mick, dear.’

She leaned in close, staring the face down, and opened her mouth to emulate him. ‘Aaaaaaah,’ she said, ‘Vick.’

‘He sings the songs,’ I said, pointing to the record spinning under its needle. It had reached ‘Coming Down Again’, where Mick sounded strange. Hoarse and squeaky in odd places. ‘You like the songs.’

She nodded, and cuddled the leg of the chair. ‘Dadda.’

‘Dadda’s coming back soon,’ I said. ‘He’s just...’ I realised I’d talked myself into a corner.

‘Out,’ she said. ‘Dadda’s out.’ I’m not sure why, but at that moment I twigged to the fact that it wasn’t Mick singing on ‘Coming Down Again’. Dadda’s out. My eyes started welling up. ‘Mumma!’ Joanna leapt forward and hugged me.

‘It’s all right,’ I said, although I could feel a sob in my throat. It was like trying to hold in a sneeze. ‘It’s all right, my love. It’s...I’m just...I really want to have my tea.’ I snorted to hold that sob at bay. It sounded revolting, but it seemed to work. ‘I want

to have my tea so we can have yummy bakewell tart for pudding. Would you like that, Joanna? Yummy bakewell tart?’

She wriggled to look me in the face and laughed. ‘Yucky Bakewell tart!’

I laughed too. ‘Close enough!’

*

Steve belched. It was a rip-roarer, slightly echoey in the small room, with a smell that reached me as I sat close to him. It was tinged with the mouthful of bakewell tart he’d just taken and the whiff of the sardines in his system. It was a sweet, fishy smell and it made me feel sick. He grinned at me, his eyes moving a little too much around the room. It was the look of a man trying very hard to be sober, and almost succeeding. He looked around at Joanna, asleep on the sofa, and chuckled. ‘Sorry, love,’ he whispered.

I was still wincing from the smell of his burp. I took my glasses off and cleaned them. ‘I think...I think maybe it’s time to talk about Dad’s offer again,’ I said. ‘I know you said-’

‘It’s not work for a man,’ he said, not unkindly, shaking his head. ‘I don’t mean any disrespect to your Dad. He’s done his time on the docks. In Griff’s yard.’

So have you, I thought, also not unkindly.

‘But I’m in the prime of my life,’ he said, slapping his belly. ‘I’m the man. I need to provide...’ He trailed off, as if he’d realised what he was saying, and took my hand. ‘Look, something will come up. I was speaking to a bloke just earlier who said he reckoned things are looking up. There’s lots going on.’

‘Was this a man in the pub?’ I asked, cautiously. I couldn’t talk to Steve like I could talk to Neil, with fun and teasing. Not anymore.

‘Yes.’ Steve kept his eyes on me, daring me to challenge his pub prophet who probably had riddles about sheep and was a dab hand on the piano. Pub men always claim to be brilliant, with only the rest of the world to blame for the fact that they’re always, no matter what time of day it is, halfway to drunk.

‘Steve,’ I said, ‘look, I know he must have meant well...but who was he? Who are these people who say they know better? You have a job waiting for you. It might not be as many hours as you were on, and you might not get to hang about with a bunch of lads, but-’

‘I think I might need to go walk off my tea,’ said Steve, letting go of my hand and standing up.

‘You’re not going to walk off your tea right down to the pub again, are you?’

He wasn’t looking at me, rummaging in his pockets. He got out a tin of tobacco and rolling papers, and started rolling a cigarette on the table. ‘Steve,’ I said, ‘at least sit down to do that. You’ll make a mess standing.’

‘I don’t need that job in the shop,’ he said, sprinkling tobacco, ‘I’m not that desperate. What about Neil? He needs to work. Man’s got to have a trade.’ He licked the edge of the paper and creased it into a rollie. ‘He needs to grow up. You know that.’

‘Steve, we’re talking about you, not Neil.’

He put the cigarette in his lips. ‘Man’s got to have a trade,’ he repeated, before lighting up and walking out of the room. I crossed my fingers and toes for him to just shut the front door on the way out, but a few seconds later I heard it slam. Joanna looked up. ‘Dadda?’

‘He’s just gone for a walk,’ I said. ‘A nice long walk.’

‘Feeda ducks?’

‘No, dear. Not to feed the ducks. It’s a bit late for that.’

‘Feeda ducks with Dadda.’ Despite being half-asleep, she slid off the sofa with surprising speed and went out into the hall, coming back with her shoes. She presented them to me. ‘Feeda ducks with Dadda.’

‘No, love.’ I took her shoes from her and put them under my chair. ‘What about more singing?’ She sighed loudly, to show she’d been defeated and wasn’t happy about it, and climbed back onto the sofa. ‘More singing from Mick?’

She was closing her eyes and cuddling herself again. ‘Vick,’ she muttered, which I took to mean ‘put some more music on’. I chose the first side of the LP again, but this time I lowered the needle over the last track, ‘Angie’. This song definitely had Mick singing on it, albeit in a weird and wimpy way, wailing ‘Angie, Aaayaangii-haay’. I took my place next to Joanna on the sofa and snaked my arms around her as she dozed, feeling myself begin to join her as the Stones’ lullaby filled the room.

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It was funny how Neil had referred to my Dad as an old man, and how Steve had said he’d ‘done his time at the docks’ as if he was some sort of ancient and overworked Titan who’d earned some sort of long rest working in a shop. My Dad, fifty-two years old, scratched his freshly-shaven chin and pushed his glasses up his nose, pointing his bony finger to the various piles of newspapers on the shelf as he counted them. I know we all think our parents have barely aged as we’ve grown up, but aside from the grey peppering his hair and moustache, my Dad still seemed as if he were Steve’s age. My Mum, two years his junior, looked older than him, which was really bizarre.

‘They’re all there,’ I said, ‘I’ve counted three times while you counted that last time. You go off and enjoy your day.’

‘When they’re late, I don’t trust them to bring all of them,’ he said. ‘Call me a daft old fart, but bad things come in threes.’

‘You’re a daft old fart,’ I said. ‘Honestly, Dad, get going! And you know, I could’ve opened. You didn’t need to be here at all. Steve’s at home at the moment, it might do him some good to get Joanna up and out of bed.’

Instead of leaving, Dad paused to lean on the counter. ‘How is Steve? I know things are tough.’

‘He’s fine,’ I said, ‘says he’s heard of new...opportunities.’ I was thinking of what Steve had said about the man in the pub, and winced a bit as I felt a second-hand false hope cross my face.

‘That bad, eh?’

‘Not at all, Dad! A man in the pub said...said that things are looking up.’

‘I think,’ he said, ‘that there have been men in the pub saying things like that for all of time. Genuinely, there must have been people drinking and saying they knew things everyone else didn’t thousands of years ago. The Romans probably had them. Maybe it’s where we get prophets from in the first place.’

‘Dad!’ I slapped his arm. ‘You can’t say things like that. You’re writing the book on things like that. Literally.’ Dad had inherited this project from some old family friend writing up local myths. When he’d got the notes as a young man, however, he’d found that they were half about Celtic saints and half about the families who’d been around for hundreds of years. Some of it had been written in a straightforward way, some of it in the form of poems to be sung along to music, though the notation for that music seemed to have disappeared.

‘But it’s so much more interesting to be cynical,’ he said, laughing. ‘But we aren’t talking about my book. Besides, it’s not really mine; it’s my great-uncle Niall’s, though I don’t think he started it. I’m just finishing it. I probably won’t finish it, that’s the nature of the thing – it would almost be wrong to end it properly. But we were talking about Steve.’

Dad had been working on that book about Saint Govan since before I was born, when his Uncle Joe had given it to him. ‘He won’t take the job here,’ I said,

blurting it out quickly. I was embarrassed for Steve. My coward of a husband, worried about what other men might think of him for working in a shop. 'He said...well, it doesn't really matter. Then he turned it into a thing about Neil and about how he should be the one thinking about getting a job. Kept saying "a man should get a trade".'

'Ah, the true gospel of the man down the pub,' said Dad, stroking his moustache now. He understood the pub prophet as a man, no, a force of nature, to be feared. 'You know, I wouldn't give Neil a job here if you paid me. Nothing against the lad, I'm very fond of him. But, well, I just can't picture it. He's not responsible.'

'Imagine him making sure all the newspapers had been delivered. I'm not even sure he could keep them all separate and in the right order, you know.' I stopped to say hello to a customer.

'Sorry, miss,' said Dad, moving aside so she could pay for her paper.

'Honestly,' I said to her, 'he's supposed to have left ten minutes ago.' She chuckled and told me to keep the change before leaving with a tinkle of the bell.

'They love the chat,' he said, 'I've taught you well. What were we talking about?'

'Neil. You know, I think he'd be a good teacher one day. He's really good with Joanna. She loves him calling her Jojo.'

'I can see that, I suppose,' said Dad, 'he's a bit like an overgrown child himself. He still with whatsername? Flower power?'

'Julie,' I said, rolling my eyes. 'She's been making him roll around in paint or something to create art.'

'Well, whatever makes them happy,' said Dad, grimacing slightly. 'The washing must be a pain, though. Your mother never has to put up with me covering myself in paint. My old job was pretty grubby, mind.'

‘I think,’ I said, hesitating a little because saying anything to my Dad about anyone ever being naked still felt a little like it was wrong somehow, ‘they do it in the raw.’

‘In the raw?’ He frowned.

‘In the...the altogether.’ The bell dinged as someone entered the shop, just in time to hear me say ‘fully naked, no clothes on. Morning!’ I smiled brightly at the shuffling old man who’d come in, my face warming in embarrassment.

Dad laughed. ‘Excuse my daughter,’ he said, ‘she was just telling me about her naked friends.’

‘Oh, is that so? Duw, duw...’ The old man had a slightly thicker accent than most Pembroke folk seemed to have. Even the little ‘duw duw’ wasn’t heard so much these days. ‘I used to have naked friends.’

‘Is...is that so?’ Dad looked amused and a little bewildered. The old man approached him, squinting. He looked a little like he was scowling too, but I think that was just how his face was. ‘We’ve all had strange friends,’ said Dad.

‘Are you Rebecca’s boy?’ said the old man.

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Dad, leaning slightly further back on the counter now, ‘raised by a Rachel, though, which also begins with an R.’ He smiled.

‘That’s it,’ said the old man, ‘knew it, boy bach.’ I giggled. Hearing my Dad being called ‘boy bach’ was too much not to. I’d never heard him being called that before. ‘And this is your daughter? There’s lovely.’ He leaned in and offered me a smile, showing several gaps in his yellowing teeth and a waft of beer breath. I found myself wondering how old he could actually be. ‘Lovely family,’ he said, and very slowly – though without the aid of any kind of stick – ambled over to the newspapers. ‘I remember this shop back when...’ He began leaning down to pick up a paper, wheezing.

‘Let me,’ said Dad, darting over and picking it up for him. ‘So,’ he said, ‘you remember the old shop? I used to come here to see my mother, when she ran it.’

What's your name, my friend?' He put the paper on the counter for the old man. Dad was looking at him strangely now, as if he already knew what the man's name was.

'Gareth,' said the old man.

'Ah, of course! It's Gareth!' Dad put his hand on the old man's arm, humouring him.

'You're a very nice young man,' said Gareth, and turned to me. 'With a lovely family.' He put some change on the counter and turned to go. 'Enjoy your naked friends!' he bellowed, surprisingly loudly, as he left.

'Naked friends, Dad!' I laughed. 'You can't go around saying things like that.'

'He's just a harmless old man,' said Dad, 'thought it might brighten up his day. I really thought I knew him, you know.'

'Are you sure you just didn't know his name before?' I thought I'd seen him around, but it was hard to tell. As Dad had said before, there had been countless old men in pubs over the years, and from the look and smell of Gareth he was most definitely an old man from the pub. Maybe they just got interchangeable after you'd seen enough of them.

'If he'd been who I thought he was,' said Dad, 'he'd be really very old by now. Impossibly old, even.'

'Maybe he just looked older when he was younger,' I said. 'He smelled like a brewery. That'll do things to the way you look.' I thought of Steve, wondered if his skin would fold prematurely and stain like a newspaper someone had spilled tea over.

'If he was the same man,' said Dad, 'the only way he could have got this old now is if he'd pickled himself.' He laughed. 'Maybe that's what happened!'

'Weren't you leaving, Dad?'

‘Yes, of course,’ said Dad. ‘Typical, you finally get the time to write and you want to put it off for as long as possible. No wonder no-one’s finished this book. See you later, and try to have a good day.’ He kissed me on the cheek. ‘I’ll pop back at close.’

‘You don’t have to.’

‘Oh, before I go, Seren...’

‘What now, Dad?’ It was like he was trying to find reasons to stay.

‘There’s a poster down there by your feet,’ he said, ‘pass it to me please, I need to put it up in the window.’

‘What’s it for?’ I said, passing it to him.

He unrolled it. ‘Tah-dah,’ he said, beaming. It was a print of a painting of Pembroke Castle, with an enormous dragon, green, rather than the traditional Welsh red, with an enormous pair of Rolling Stones lips at the end of its snout. The official gig poster. The legendary dragon meeting the legendary band.

‘I didn’t have you down as a Stones fan,’ I said.

‘Ah, well, strictly speaking, I preferred the Beatles,’ he said, ‘and more strictly speaking, Dizzy Gillespie. But I think it’ll be good for the town to see something like this, and I want to show some support.’

‘I’m sure Mick Jagger’s going to need it, Dad.’ I rolled my eyes to make sure he got it.

‘Be as sarcastic as you want,’ he said, ‘but we have to fight for this one. The wheels are in motion to stop him coming near our castle. Too much noise for our quiet town, they’re saying.’

‘Who’s saying that?’

‘Outraged busybodies,’ he said, ‘but outraged busybodies with council seats. That Gwyneth Cherry, and the cowards who’ll do as she says.’ He picked up the

sticky tape and tore some off, carefully applying squares of it to the corners of the poster. 'We need to move with the times. If enough of us show an interest, I think we can back the Rolling Stones. Keep the life pumping through this town.'

'I just think it's funny, seeing you like this over the band,' I said.

'Why? It's all the blues,' he said, sticking the poster to the window. 'I remember the first time I saw them on TV, playing 'Red Rooster' or whatever it was called. I know I was already a bit old for rock n' roll when it came along, but it's all the blues. It's tied to jazz, you know.'

'I don't need to hear more about jazz, Dad,' I said. He'd raised me on Dizzy Gillespie and Chet Baker. I loved it, but once he got going on jazz it was hard to stop him. 'And you're never too old for rock n' roll. Now come on, get going. Have a nice day.'

'You too,' he said, opening the door, 'and remember, smile! The Rolling Stones are coming to town!'

Chapter Three

It had been a quiet day. Children were out making the most of the summer's end before school started out, so lunchtime was the only really busy time. By the time I was locking up and Dad came jogging up to me, I felt that strange kind of tired – from relaxing, not working hard.

'You look knackered,' he said, by way of greeting.

'Charming,' I said, 'you shouldn't be running places like that, Dad. It's not becoming of a man your age.'

'I'm in the prime of my life,' he said.

'Steve was saying that just last night.'

'What, that I was in the prime of my life?'

'No, that he was.' I turned to walk home. 'Dad, why did you run here?'

'So I could walk you home,' he said, shrugging. 'Wanted to make sure I caught you.'

'Well, I'm not going home yet,' I said. 'I'm meeting Helen to walk around the castle.'

'Who's watching Joanna?'

'Steve.'

'Ah, of course. Well, in that case, I'll walk you to the castle.'

I laughed. 'You live opposite the castle, Dad.'

'All the better, then. Come on.' He set off at a marching pace. The shop was at the castle end of the town, just past the turn off to the Dock, so we wouldn't have a long walk anyway. I hurried to catch up with him.

'Dad! I've been on my feet all day.'

‘Sorry.’ He grinned sheepishly. ‘I’ve been sat down all day. Got to keep the legs moving. So...I suppose one good thing to come out of Steve’s employment, ah, issue is that Joanna gets to spend more time with him.’

‘I suppose.’

‘You know, I wish I’d known my Dad better,’ he said. ‘I mean, I know I was a grown man when he died. But I felt like there was a lot of time lost to him working before that. Treasure your time with your parents. I know I’ve said it before, but it doesn’t hurt to be reminded.’

‘I think it would have always felt like you didn’t have enough time with Granddad,’ I said. I always referred to my Dad’s Dad as Granddad, even though we’d never met. His plane had been shot down during the war, a couple of years before I was born. ‘And, I mean, he was sort of taken from you early. You say you were a grown man, but you weren’t that old.’

Dad nods. ‘I’m older now than he ever got to be, though.’ He stopped for a minute and took his watch out of the waistcoat he always wore. ‘Did you close early?’

‘I closed quickly,’ I said. ‘It was pretty quiet.’

‘Fair enough,’ he said, replacing the watch.

‘You should get a wristwatch. It would save time taking that out of your pocket.’

‘A watch that saves time. Well, I never.’ He patted his pocket. ‘I like my old watch. It’s...’

‘Old?’

‘Exactly. My Uncle Joe gave me this, it was his. It’s nice to carry around a chunky piece of someone’s life, and nicer if it’s practical.’ I remembered meeting his Uncle Joe for the first time when I was little. He had that rich, brown tobacco smell about him.

We kept walking. 'Do you miss Uncle Joe?'

'I think about him every day,' said Dad, without hesitation. 'I said I never had enough time with my father. But Joe seemed determined to make up for that. He was Dad's best friend, see, and an old friend of my Mum's. I used to wonder, and this'll sound daft...I used to wonder if maybe they started carrying on after Dad died.' He laughed. 'I suppose I just wanted them both to be happy.'

'You're very sweet, Dad. They didn't ever, did they?'

'I have my suspicions,' he said, tapping his nose, 'but I suppose we'll never know, now.' He stopped to cross the road to his house. Dad lived in an old Flemish cottage, beautifully ancient and poky. It needed a fair bit of work done that he was probably getting too old for, but fixing it up was one of his hobbies and Mum loved the place. It must have been one of the oldest houses in Pembroke when they'd bought it and they'd made it so lovely after giving me the old house on Eastback. 'Look,' he said, before crossing, 'try to get Steve to take this job again. Times are tough, but you're raising a daughter in one of the most beautiful towns in the world. It would be rubbish if something were to...just try your best, Seren.'

'I will.' I pulled him in for a hug. 'I love you, Dad.'

'I love you too. Hywel fawr.' He crossed over to the house, and I turned to look down the road. I could see Helen waving at me down the hill, at the edge of the path by the castle's moat.

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'Let's not talk about Steve any more,' said Helen, throwing crumbs at a paper bag floating in the water. She frowned. 'It's like they can tell I've brought stale bread. It's not my fault, ducks! Mummy can't afford to buy new bread just to feed you!'

‘Helen,’ I said, ‘the ducks tend to stay on the Mill Pond. There aren’t many of them in the moat. That is a paper bag.’

‘Is it?’ She squinted hard, leaning forward over the water, and I chuckled at the thought of her falling in. It would be a very Helen thing to do. ‘Ah, so it is.’

‘Why won’t you wear your glasses?’ I said, gently leading her away from the edge in case she took a miss-step. ‘Come on, back on the path.’

‘What was I saying?’ she said, waving her arm at me to show she was fine and could stand by herself. ‘Oh yes. Let’s not discuss Steve. The two of you clearly have things to work out and I’m going to be useless at helping you there.’ This was also very Helen. Cold but, well, honest. ‘How’s little Joanna doing?’

‘She sings about you a lot.’

‘She’s a little star, like her Mum.’ Helen ruffled my hair. ‘Are you still singing her to sleep with the Beatles?’

‘The Stones at the moment.’

‘Goodness dear, do you think that’s wise? What about Mick Jagger and that Mars bar? The incident with Marianne Faithfull?’

‘What about them? Does he like Mars bars?’ What-’

She put a hand up to silence me. ‘If you don’t know, then it’s best that I don’t tell you. Needless to say, I can’t eat Mars bars comfortably any more. Ych a fi.’ She danced a little wriggly dance of disgust. ‘Anyway. How was work? How’s that handsome man?’

‘What handsome man?’

‘Your Dad.’

‘Helen!’ I slapped her arm. ‘He’s well though. And going back to the Stones, he seems pretty keen for the gig. He’s put up a poster in the window, says we need to show our support as a local business.’

‘I’m not sure the band need our support, dear.’

‘Apparently they do,’ I said, ‘there’s rumblings about not letting them play. Too noisy. Not quiet enough for our quiet town.’

‘Quiet town.’ Helen rolled her eyes. ‘The songs you hear up and down the street on a Saturday night certainly aren’t quiet. Typical though.’

‘What’s typical?’

‘Typical small town mentality, Seren. The Rolling Stones are the stuff of legend, so we naturally want to take that legend and shut it out. Ground it. In doing so, they’ll ensure that people will talk for years about the time the Stones *nearly* played Pembroke Castle.’

I thought about this for a moment. ‘It would make for a fine legend in itself. “Remember that great night?” “No.” “Me neither.”’

‘It would be a real waste. Still, wouldn’t be the first time the council has turned down something interesting.’ Helen paused to take a small silver case from her handbag. She took one of her cigarettes out and lit it.

‘I’m sure they had good reasons not to fund your alien-spotting, Helen.’

‘You needn’t make it sound so silly,’ she said, ‘I know I’m not Dr Who or Professor Bernard. But if they could even put up half the money for a real telescope...’ Helen had, for about a year or so, been campaigning to set up an observatory in Pembrokeshire, preferably near to the coast.

‘They have other things to be spending money on, sadly. Times are tough.’ I loved Helen, but I always had to calm her down a bit on this one. She’d seen a few strange lights on a beach and thought that the little green men were coming to get her. Even when we were children, she’d decided that a part of the Holyland woods was a ‘fairy garden’ where we had to stop and say hello to the fairies while we were walking her dog. If we didn’t, she’d said, there would be bad luck.

‘I suppose it’s hardly in the spirit of “I’m Backing Britain”, is it?’ She sighed and took a deep drag on the cigarette. ‘Is that a puffin?’

‘I think we’re a bit far inland for puffins,’ I said. ‘In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one. Where are you looking?’

She pointed vaguely in the distance with her cigarette, squinting so intensely that her eyes were almost closed. ‘Out there,’ she said, ‘or...could be a heron.’

‘Those are two very different looking birds! Although I have at least seen herons down here before.’ I tried squinting in the direction she was looking in. A gull was patrolling the other side of the moat. ‘I think that’s some sort of gull, Helen.’

She frowned. ‘Maybe I should wear my glasses more.’

‘It’s probably a bit late in the season now,’ I said, ‘but maybe next summer we can take a trip out to Skomer Island. They have puffins there, and I’d certainly like to see them.’

‘Funny, that,’ said Helen, ‘living right near an island of puffins but never having seen one.’

‘Who knows? They might not even exist. A Skomer secret dreamed up by the monks on Caldey Island.’ At least visiting Caldey was easier and quicker – the ferry from Tenby took less than an hour and hadn’t yet made me seasick.

‘When we were little, I used to think that Caldey Island was magical, you know. It was that ritual of jumping on a boat, crossing the water...then, when you get there, it’s like you’ve moved somewhere else in the world. Somewhere really, really old.’ Helen paused to finish her smoke. ‘Then of course, I couldn’t understand why we had to leave before the end of the day. I know now that we couldn’t afford to stay overnight on the island and that the ferry stopped running at six, but back then it felt like something would happen if we stayed past sundown.’

‘Like a spell? Or a curse?’ I laughed.

‘Didn’t you ever have anywhere like that?’

I thought about it for a moment. 'St Govan's chapel.'

'What a wonderful place! Yes, that's definitely got something to it. Ghosts.' She waved her hands over my head and made wooing noises, then went to tickle me.

'Don't!' I said, giggling, 'I can't be tickled! If one or both of us goes into that moat, I'm blaming you!' I held her back and she laughed too. 'St Govan's chapel is bloody strange though. My Dad's writing his book on it. Well, it's not his.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's finishing it for someone else. An uncle, or a great uncle, or...someone's uncle. Goes back a few uncles, I think.'

'Darling, that's so fascinating. Why haven't you told me about this? Why do you just throw these wonderful things out there? A myth measured in uncles!'

'It just hasn't come up,' I said, though it was a little lie. I knew things bordering on the supernatural fascinated Helen, and I wanted to keep her on the roughly straight and narrow. It was astounding that she had managed to hold onto her job and her boyfriend at all, with her strange adventures she'd been going off on in the last few years. The sixties may have ended and the wave may have rolled back, but for Helen it was all somewhat sweetly still going on.

'It's so fascinating. Makes you wonder how many times we've been visited...people think that UFO spotting came in with all those stories about flying saucers from Mars back in the nineteen-fifties, but people have been fascinated by strange lights in the sky for a lot longer than that. Who's to say that's not where legends come from? Who built the pyramids?'

'The Egyptians,' I said, before adding, 'and their slaves. Mainly their slaves, I think.'

'Really though?'

‘Yes, really!’ I laughed. ‘I don’t think the Martians helped at all. The Ancient Egyptians were cruel enough off their own backs.’

‘Don’t you believe in anything mysterious?’ We had come around the moat to the bridge. I looked up at the Great Keep of Pembroke Castle. ‘I mean, look at the castle. People built this thousands of years ago. How?’

‘With a lot of stone,’ I said, ‘and it was probably more like hundreds of years ago. Real life is just that, Helen – doesn’t matter how bizarre it gets.’

‘Isn’t it better to see it as something wonderful though? Rather than just something ordinary?’

‘But that’s what it is,’ I said. ‘And besides, can’t something ordinary be wonderful too?’

‘Maybe.’ She bit her lip. ‘Why don’t we nip to the George for a drink? Come on, you’ve finished work.’

‘I should really get back.’

‘Just one, come on.’

‘Just one then,’ I said, ‘then I’ve got to head back to get the tea on.’

‘Fuck the tea,’ said Helen, ‘Steve can sort himself out.’

I laughed, and wondered whether I’d ever seen him actually doing anything to prepare food. ‘Just one!’

*

Neil’s studio – the large green shed, more like a barn, in his parent’s garden – was a cool place, in several senses of the word. It was full of his hip paintings that showed both his talent and strangeness, but was also just a little bit chilly.

‘Don’t you have to wear a coat in here in the winter?’ I asked.

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘but not normally with anything on underneath.’

‘That sounds uncomfortable.’

‘It’s surprisingly nice,’ he said. ‘The duffle coat is a bit itchy at first but it’s like it grows on you, like a long skin. It feels primal.’

‘What, as if you’ve hunted and killed your duffle coat and now you’re wearing it?’ I frowned. ‘I thought you were a vegetarian?’

‘You’ve got me there, Miss Farley.’ He raised his hands in surrender. He still occasionally called me ‘Miss Farley’, even though I wasn’t a Miss anymore and my surname was no longer Farley. ‘I was, erm...thinking more in term of the human instinct. A natural, spiritual...’ he shrugged. ‘One of those things.’

‘You should hear yourself sometimes. Between you and Helen, it’s a wonder I manage to lead a normal life.’

‘Are the aliens still coming to get Helen?’ asked Neil. He smirked.

‘Are you still a caveman for wearing a coat with nothing on underneath during the winter?’

‘At least that’s still on Earth,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what I think about life on Mars or whatever, but I think we’ve got loads of problems we need to fix on this planet before we talk about any of that. Speaking of which, this is the one I wanted to show you.’ He had draped an old tablecloth over an easel at the far end of the room. He beamed at me. ‘Ready to see it?’

‘Yes!’ I was always excited to see Neil’s paintings, especially the ones he managed to do without Julie. When he worked on his own, it was just with a canvas, a brush, and paint, and that for me is the best way to make art. This canvas in particular was enormous. In fact, I thought, it might be the biggest of Neil’s I’d seen yet, at about five feet by four.

‘It’s a little bit...arty,’ he said, hesitantly.

‘It is art, I suppose.’

‘No, but it’s...spiritual. Conceptual. Not a straightforward scene. It’s, like...it’s hard to describe. Do you remember when we had to keep those diaries of our dreams, back in school?’

‘Yes.’ I probably wouldn’t have remembered, but we’d found them a few years later and discussed how much of them had come true, as Helen had just started trying to read tarot cards. ‘Remember when we read them back a few years ago?’ Come to think of it, that had been one of the last times Neil, Helen and I had all spent an evening together.

He waved his hands about like a magician. ‘The prophecies! What did we think our dreams told us again?’

‘You dreamed that you were making friends with dolphins. What did we say that was?’

‘Helen said I was going to be close to nature. Got that right, eh?’

‘You do spend a lot of time out here in the garden. Neil, I dreamed that I was getting married to a monkey. There wasn’t really any prophecy in those dreams.’

‘Well...’ He laughed. ‘I mean, no offence...’

‘Neil, my husband is not...never mind. What does this have to do with the painting?’

‘Well, um.’ He giggled. ‘Sorry. You did marry Steve. There! I had to say it! At least I said sorry.’

I frowned, but I was trying very hard not to laugh too. ‘The painting, Neil.’

‘Right. OK. Serious face. So, I had this dream and, basically, I thought I’d paint what happened in it. The only problem...or maybe not...is that it was a dream so I’m not sure how much of it I could actually remember and how much of it I just made up. Anyway, here it is.’

He pulled the tablecloth off it. Neil's paintings were always sort of blurry but colourful, textured, like Van Gogh's, but this seemed to be more detailed. In the foreground was a mass of green grass, almost as tall as the figure standing in front of it. Behind them were several thin towers reaching up into the sky, lit up by an enormous, even out-of-scale sunset behind them.

'The sun is massive,' I said. 'But I like it.'

'It wasn't the sun,' he said, shaking his head, 'or, I don't know, I don't think it was. It was difficult to tell as everything was all slow. But it was glowing and growing and there was this roaring noise, like the wind on the cliffs right in your ears.'

'Who was the person standing in front of it?' I squinted at the figure, which was featureless in silhouette. The arms were very thin.

'I remember...' Neil folded his arms, something he'd always done when he was deep in thought. 'I remember...you know when you know stuff in dreams? Like, no-one tells you, it's just...information?'

'Not really.'

'OK, well, like say if you had a dream where cats are talking to you. You just accept it, that's what the world you're in gives you.'

'Oh, I understand.'

'Well, what I first thought about the person here is that it was you.' Neil grinned. 'Pretty weird, right?'

'But it wasn't?'

'It's hard to describe. They turned around and they were a man.' He furrowed his brow.

'You had a dream where I turned into a man in front of a big sunset?' I laughed. 'Well, it's definitely not any kind of prophecy. Were you smoking dope before bed again?'

'I will admit that gives me funny dreams,' he said, 'but no. Or...maybe. Probably. But this was really, really vivid.'

'That doesn't mean it's going to come true,' I said. 'We've all had really vivid dreams.'

'Man, the heat off this thing,' he said, ignoring me and wafting his hand across the sun-like orb, 'was like...being abroad. Like Spain. Like how hot I'd imagine Spain would be, anyway.'

'You're an artist, but maybe not a wordsmith, Neil,' I said. 'It's such a good painting though. I'm jealous. How long did it take you to do?'

He shrugged. 'A couple of days.'

'A couple of days? Neil, that's ridiculous.'

'Why? I was working for most of that. I barely slept. Blimey, I barely smoked.'

I whistled. 'Serious stuff then.'

'I was worried I'd forget about it.' He traced his finger over the edges of the ball of light in the painting, feeling the texture of the paint. 'You know what it's like with dreams. They're like stories that change every time you tell someone else.'

'I suppose so.' I stood back a few paces to get a better look at it. 'What does Julia think about it?'

'I haven't showed her yet.' He scratched his head. 'We had an argument.'

'What was it about?'

'Ah, who knows? Women, right?' He grinned. I punched him on the arm. 'Ow! Dead arm, man!'

'I thought I didn't have to give you those anymore,' I said, but I laughed. 'You can be such a tit, Neil.'

‘Yeah, maybe.’ He rubbed at the spot I’d punched him on. ‘So...when did you and Steve decide to, like, have kids and stuff?’

‘We’ve only got the one.’

‘You know what I mean, though. When is the right time for stuff like that?’

‘I suppose you just know.’ I held my hands up. ‘It just sort of happens.’

‘The big things in your life just sort of happen?’ Neil scratched his head. ‘Man, that sounds so dull.’

‘I suppose life is dull. You grow up, you get married. Exciting things happen, but they happen to other people. You just stand on the outside of it, feeling the walls. The movement in the sound, without hearing the music itself.’

‘Maybe it is you in the painting,’ said Neil, ‘feeling like you’re standing next to something bigger, just looking at it.’

‘I’m not sure if you’re trying to flatter me or not. If you are, you’re doing a terrible job of it.’

‘No, it’s just...I don’t know, you have a beautiful daughter and a husband who loves you-’

‘I’m not actually sure Steve does love me.’ I didn’t mean to say that. It just popped out. Neil, who normally, despite the amount of dope he smokes, has a witty comeback to everything, didn’t reply. His mouth hung open from the sentence I cut him off from. He took a step forward and hugged me.

‘Man,’ he said, ‘that’s so...rubbish.’

‘I know,’ I said, feeling like my voice was oddly flat. I didn’t feel choked up. I just felt a bit groggy.

‘It’s rubbish, I mean, that you feel like that.’ He let go of me, his odd, spicy smell hanging in the air. ‘Of course Steve loves you. He just can’t say it. He can’t say how sad he is, either.’

‘But why not? I know there’s pride and being a man and all of that. But he’s my husband. Vows were taken. You have no issue with that sort of thing.’

‘Well, I live outside the realm of regular society and practice an alternative lifestyle.’ Neil almost kept a straight face, but giggled at the end. ‘I’m useless, essentially. That’s OK. I like being useless. But...as I said before, Steve thrives on being useful. He can’t do, well...’ He tugged at his long hair.

‘He needs to work. I understand that. But why won’t he take the job at Dad’s shop? And why does he need to spend so long at the pub?’

Neil shrugs. ‘I can’t answer all of it.’

‘I just worry. There was an old man who came into the shop the other day, said he recognised Dad. He reeked of booze and fags. He could have been anywhere between sixty and, well, one hundred and eight. I don’t want Steve to end up like that. I love him too much. I just worry that he loves the idea of ending up like that without realising it.’

‘Some of those old men are wise old sages, you know.’ Neil pointed at his painting. ‘I think some of them feel this sort of thing all the time.’

‘Feel what?’

‘Like...the world is so big and bright. They feel so small and dark when they’re stood beside it. And they can see that it’s OK to feel like that.’

I laughed. ‘I thought it was me in the painting.’

‘Well, art tells a thousand stories at once. That’s where the beauty of it is.’

‘You should hear yourself sometimes. So, what, it wouldn’t be so bad if Steve became one of your wise old pub men?’

‘Sometimes they’re prophets.’

‘No, Neil, sometimes after a few drinks you think they sound like prophets. But they’re one up from tramps. They can be witty and charming but in the end they

wake up every day with a pillow full of dribble. Yellow fingertips. Dogshit crusting over behind the sofa. I don't want that for my husband.'

'I don't think it'll happen. None of these guys are ever married, for a start. Or if they are, you never actually see their wives. Like in *Dad's Army*. Captain Mainwaring's wife.'

'A running joke. That would make me a running joke. An invisible one at that.' I sighed. 'Let's talk about something else. This is making me sad.'

'Fair enough. Hey, it has nothing to do with how you're feeling...but do you want to try a glass of my apple wine?'

'Promise me I won't go blind.' Neil had been talking excitedly about his apple wine for the last few months that it had been brewing. He'd put a stocking over his head, snuck into his next-door neighbours' garden and picked the apples off their tree. The thing is, he'd got a bit carried away and had to make vats of wine, chutneys and pickles just to use all the apples he'd stolen. 'Didn't you say last week it would need a bit longer?'

'It'll be fine. I mean, I've bottled it up, so it'll have to be.' He bent down to a battered cupboard, opening it to reveal several bottles. He passed me one. It had a beautifully designed label on it, gorgeous ink drawings of apples and 'Neil's Pembroke Apple Wine' written in beautiful lettering, looping and curling but readable. 'I admit, I really really wanted to get them into their bottles. Make a finished product.'

'In another lifetime, you could have been a great, erm...label designer?' I wasn't sure what the exact term was.

'Commercial art.' He grimaced. 'Not for me. It's not...I don't know, real. Selling out.'

'But if it's good art, it's good art.'

'If it sold the wine, it would make money. It's...tough to put into words. I wouldn't want to chance it with the system, you know?'

‘Not really, Neil. Are you sure you want to open one of these now? If you’ve only just bottled them up?’

‘It’s wine, we’re meant to drink it.’

‘At two o’clock in the afternoon?’

‘One glass of it, then. Pass it back, I’ll uncork it.’

He poured us a couple into two slightly grimy tumblers, handing me the least grubby one, and held his glass up. ‘Iechyd da.’

‘Iechyd da.’ We clinked our glasses together, and I took a sip. It was very sweet with a bitter aftertaste. I wasn’t sure about it, but I tried to stop myself from grimacing. ‘This is actually quite nice,’ I said.

‘Is it?’ He pulled a face. ‘Might improve on the second sip. I hope it does. I’ve got quite a lot of it.’ He took another sip. ‘Well, at least neither of us is going blind.’

‘That’s true,’ I said. I winced as I sucked another mouthful of wine through my teeth.

‘I’m sorry about all this shit with Steve, man,’ said Neil, suddenly looking very tired. ‘And I’m sorry I’m so shit with all this shit. I guess I’ve never felt the way you must do about someone before. I mean...wow, to marry someone, that’s got to actually be, like, the myth or the legend. A genuine fairytale.’

‘You don’t feel like that about Julia?’

‘I think I might...in a bit. At some point. In the future, you know?’

‘Well, Neil,’ I said, ‘not that you absolutely have to commit to anything immediately...but you’ve been going out with her for, what now, six months?’

‘Eight,’ he said, ‘although Julie believes that “going out with” is an outmoded definition of a human relationship and challenging it is a minor form of revolution.’ He chuckled. ‘But yeah, we’ve been going out for eight months. I guess that feels like a long time.’

I thought about how much smaller Joanna was eight months ago. It didn't feel like a long time at all.

'A long time,' he repeated, before taking another sip of wine. 'That is actually still pretty hideous.'

'The eight months or the wine?'

He laughed. 'The wine, Seren. Kind of bitter. The eight months have been good, but...where from here? I kind of feel happy to see Julia, but then I can't wait to have some time to myself when she's around.'

I sipped my wine again and grimaced. 'You may not like my advice.'

'I can take it. I'm a manly man.' He exaggerated a heavy frown. 'Grrr.'

'Dump her. She can't be that happy if you're not that happy, unless she's, you know...oblivious. If it's more than six months and you'd rather have your own time than spend it with her, well...'

He sat down cross-legged on the floor. 'I was pretty lonely, though. Before.'

'That's a silly answer though. Lonely is one way of looking at it. Being free to do whatever, without having to look after anyone or have dinner ready, well...what?'

Neil's eyebrows were raised. 'Nothing.'

'Good. I've made my bed and I'm happy in it. Things are a bit rough, granted, but Steve's still in it. Even if he snores like he's gargling gravel.'

'You are happy then?'

'Yes. But you're not. You're the one who's always banging on about finding your path and that. Well, you've got to be happy.'

'You know,' said Neil, 'I'm not sure I've ever been happy with anyone I've gone out with. Remember when I went out with Helen?' Bringing up something weird like that at an inconvenient moment for it was one of Neil's favourite things. I could never tell if he meant to do it or if it was just one of his Neil-quirks.

‘We were still only kids,’ I said, ‘I’m not sure anyone knows if they’re happy or not at that age.’ Helen had told me that Neil’s long fingers had felt great, but she’d wished he’d have cut his nails more often. ‘I mean, you’re not even a real person at that point.’ I found myself looking at his fingertips, seeing the crusted paint and dirt on them. I took another sip of wine, wincing.

‘She was pretty cool. Mad though.’

‘Says the man who lives in a shed in his parents’ garden and rolls around naked in paint.’

‘That’s just me though,’ said Neil, ‘it’s different when a girl’s mad. All sort of exciting at first, then...sorry, that’s not a fair thing to say.’ He must have seen me frowning. ‘I did lend her those books about flying saucers.’

I laughed. ‘You sent her off course there! She still keeps threatening to drag me along to look out for aliens with her. Made-up stories about shooting stars, I’m telling you.’

‘She’ll be saying she’s been abducted next.’ He looked up at his painting. It really was something, the shades of orange and yellow and red with the darkness of the figure. It was more than black; there were blues and greens in there too, textures in the sharp lines. ‘Maybe that’s Helen in the painting, looking at whatever sort of space magic she believes in. Like, we see it as this mad hobby, but to her it’s this thing that’s huge and in front of her. Like...faith or something.’

‘There’s a title for you,’ I said, ‘*Faith or something*.’

‘It’s certainly better than Seventy-three twenty-two.’ He scratched his head. ‘I think it’s twenty-two. Hard to number the paintings at the moment, as I’m not sure if I should count the art Julia and I do together. Don’t ask me if that counts as art at all, I can see you’re about to.’ He held up his open palm. ‘Mainly because I’m not sure myself.’

‘I suppose it must be difficult...you’ve got to get to a point where you ask yourself if the art makes sense, right?’

He nodded. 'I think I get what you mean. Like how much of it is deducing a pattern from the mess, and how much of it is just...nonsense.'

'Exactly.'

He looked up at the ceiling. 'Fuck. We're not getting any younger. I've got to tell Julia I don't want to see her any more, otherwise I'll be sifting through the nonsense trying to look for the meaning forever.'

'It's the right thing to do,' I said, raising my glass and trying to smile in the smuggest way possible. In talking Neil round to doing the right thing, I'd ended up thinking about my own nonsense. I glugged down the last of my wine. 'I'd best head off home. Steve's been watching Joanna today and it's only fair that I relieve him.'

'You do that,' said Neil, grunting as he lifted himself, 'and you guys have a proper talk, yeah? If you need any quality time together, I'm always willing to watch Jojo.'

'Thanks,' I said, 'I might take you up on that. Just promise me one thing, Neil?'

'Anything for my best friend,' he said. He rarely called me that and it knocked me off my game for a second.

'Don't give her any apple wine, OK?' I grinned, even though I felt something rising from my stomach up into my chest. 'You're my best friend too.'

Chapter Four

It wasn't all that long a walk from Neil's place on Paynter Street back to Eastback, but I savoured it. We've always liked walking in the Farley family. Strong connections going back with my Dad, I think – he says he still remembers a time when there weren't any cars in town. I believe him. Photographs in newspapers of London and Cardiff look mad, with all that traffic.

I took the shortcut through the cakewalk. Neil, Helen and I once had a bottle of brown ale in the that alley which he'd nabbed from his Dad. We found out later that his Dad had actually given it to him. He was just trying to look impressive, the silly boy.

I came out onto the commons and paused, breathing in the end-of-summer air. The scent of blossoms, or something else flowery. I took a deeper breath and regretted it. The stream running through the commons had an unclean, pissy smell that undercut the sweetness. 'Never breathe in too deep on a summer's day,' my Dad had once said, 'you'll smell the muck on the fields and spoil the illusion.'

I chuckled to myself and crossed the road, cutting through the field and heading up New Way. Neil swore that one night he'd been walking back home and had seen a badger walking down the sloping alley. Apparently he'd heard its claws clack-clacking on the stone before he'd seen it striding almost alongside him. He stopped and it did too, looking him up and down before marching ahead. As I walked up, I thought I spotted a fox at the top of it. Strange to see one in the daylight. But as I got closer, I saw that it was an enormous ginger cat. I paused at the top to catch my breath. 'Puss puss,' I said, wiggling my fingers at the cat. It eyed me suspiciously. 'Come here. Come on.'

It stood, stretched, and trotted over, head-butting my shin. 'You're nicer than that cat that keeps coming in my garden,' I said, using the sort of voice I had used for Joanna when she was smaller. 'She's a scabby mess. You're gorgeous, aren't you?'

'Prerrrp,' said the cat, smearing dribble on my shoe.

‘That is a bit disgusting though, girl.’

‘Boy.’ A man was slowly walking towards me from the left, wearing baggy trousers and a thick tweed jacket. ‘Little fellow’s a boy. Seren, isn’t it?’

I struggled to recognise him for a minute. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘Gareth, isn’t it? How are you?’

‘Middling,’ he said, patting his stomach. ‘Billy’s brew at the York. Strong, thick, and nutty.’

I wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. ‘Aren’t you warm in all that?’ Under his jacket he had a cardigan on, and a thick cotton shirt.

He swept his hand through the thin, messy white hair on his head and patted his red face. His hands were meaty and even from the small distance, I could see the white hairs running up them. ‘It is hot, isn’t it?’ He beamed at me. ‘How are you? Up to much today?’

‘Just, you know,’ I said. I didn’t really know. I felt a little light-headed. Maybe that apple wine hadn’t been such a good idea after all. ‘Going to see my daughter.’

He nodded, his expression suddenly solemn. ‘Family is important. Give Steve my regards.’ He looked over his shoulder and mumbled.

‘Pardon?’

‘Billy’s brew.’ He smiled again. ‘Calling me back to the York. One more, it won’t hurt.’ He saluted me, and turned to head back the way he came. I crouched down to stroke the ginger cat.

‘He’s very strange, isn’t he? Yes he is, yes he his!’ I scratched behinds its ears, then frowned. When Gareth had come into the shop the other day, I hadn’t mentioned Steve to him.

*

‘Don’t panic,’ said Dad. He was sat at the dining room table with a cup of black tea. ‘Take a seat.’ He was wearing a plain black jumper with a few holes in it, and his chestnut-coloured brogues looked scuffed.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked.

‘Spare key,’ he said softly. ‘Mrs Henshall heard Joanna crying.’

‘Well, that’s not unusual,’ I said, sighing. Joanna loved Steve, but she sometimes had odd moments where it seemed like she didn’t really recognise him. Probably from him not being around that much when he was working. Or not being around much when he wasn’t working. ‘Where’s Steve? She’s normally OK after he tickles her a bit. He calls them fun hugs.’

‘Fun hugs?’ Dad looked perplexed. ‘What isn’t fun about a normal hug?’ He took a sip of his tea. ‘Ach.’

‘You don’t like it without milk.’

‘I’m trying to like it without milk. Your mother says it’s better.’ He took another sip and winced. ‘For my health, obviously. Nothing to do with the taste. Sit down.’

‘OK.’ Normally Dad could talk about tea for hours. ‘Where did you say Steve was?’

‘I didn’t. Mrs Henshall heard Joanna crying and knocked on the door. There wasn’t a reply. She called me and here I am. Shut the shop early.’

‘...and Steve’s, what? Not here?’

Dad looked from side to side. ‘No, he’s not.’

‘Why didn’t you call me sooner?’ I stood up, horrified. Steve had left her at home by herself. The silly bastard. Anything could have happened.

‘I tried phoning Neil’s,’ said Dad, a little defensively, ‘the two of you must have been in his garden hovel because there was no reply. I had to prioritise here.’

‘Where’s Joanna?’ Before he was able to reply, I bolted out of the room and up the narrow stairs to her room. She was safely napping.

‘She’s fine,’ said Dad, slowly following me up the stairs with a little effort. ‘Ooh, my knees. She’s fine. Granddad’s here, got her to go off to sleep.’

‘How did you do that?’

‘Same as I used to do for you. Had a little sing-song.’

‘I think you’re magic. Sometimes I can get her to sleep with music if I put a record on, but never with just me singing.’

‘Maybe you’re just singing her the wrong songs.’ He smiled. ‘You stay here and keep an eye on her. I’m going out to look for Steve.’

‘No, you stay here,’ I said, trying my best to shut Joanna’s door quietly. My hands were shaking. How could Steve do this? ‘I’m going to find him.’

‘I think-’

‘He’ll be in one of the pubs,’ I said, heading down the stairs. My legs felt heavy. ‘There’s not many of them.’

‘Actually there’s quite a few,’ said Dad, ‘wouldn’t it be better if Joanna’s mother was here when she woke up?’

‘Wouldn’t it be better if Steve got an actual bollocking when I find him?’ I said. ‘Come on, Dad. I love you but you’re a bit of a softie.’ I thought of Walter the Softie from the Beano and imagined Dad wearing big round glasses and a daft bow tie and laughed a little too loudly.

‘Be that as it may...’ He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘I’m not sure you’re in the right state to be bollocking anyone.’

I touched his hand and lowered it gently. 'Stay here. Help yourself to whatever you'd like from the kitchen. Put some milk in your tea.' I turned to leave before he could reply. Not that he was going to. Dad's magic was quiet, soft like the songs he used to sing to me. That he now had to sing to Joanna, because Steve had disappeared.

*

First was the Crossed Swords, because it was the closest. The outside of the pub was very different to the inside; the lettering was stark and modern and the pub sign was a simple painting of two swords, well, crossed. I went in, the thick air not unpleasant but still a bit too heavy. The place was fairly empty, it being late afternoon.

'Afternoon,' said the barman, running a cloth around a glass. He looked as if he'd been doing it for hours. He didn't ask me what drink I wanted, I noticed.

'Hello, I'm looking for Steve Lloyd,'

'Steve Lloyd?' He frowned at me. 'Oh, Stevie, you mean?'

'Apparently,' I said. 'Broad shoulders, big strong man.'

'Yeah, I know, I know,' he said, irritably. 'Plenty of Steves in here, missus. If you can't see him though, he's not here.' He looked back at his cloth intently.

I took a deep breath. 'Has he been here at all today?'

He looked up, looking almost as annoyed as I felt. 'Look...wait...yeah. Yeah, he has.' He went back to his smearing. The cloth didn't look very clean.

'What time?'

'I dunno.' He shrugged and put down the glass, making it look like a real chore. He walked a few paces to pick up his wristwatch, which was lying on top of the till. 'Opening time.'

‘When was that?’ I felt like I wanted to strangle him.

‘I got here late,’ he said, ‘so...one?’ It was four o’clock. Steve must have left Joanna around midday.

‘When did he leave?’

The barman harrumphed. ‘He stayed for about a...half an hour, maybe?’

‘Where did he say he was going next?’

‘He didn’t.’ He snatched up the glass and the cloth and began vigorously wiping the rim of the glass. An old man wearing a flat cap had tottered up to the till. ‘If you don’t mind, love,’ said the barman, ‘I’m a bit busy for all this.’

I gritted my teeth. ‘Thank you for all your help,’ I said, and left. Even after a few minutes in the pub, my eyes felt strange adjusting to the sunlight again. Why were pubs so dark and gloomy? I looked up and down the street. If he’d headed off to the right he’d have gone to the Royal Oak, or maybe a little further to the Hope. There was every chance he might have gone left to the York, to my left, up past the chapel forking Main Street. I’d always thought chapels were smaller churches, but this chapel – whichever brand of Christianity it was – was enormous. Come to think of it, Westgate Chapel, where I got married, where we’d always had weddings in my family, was pretty big too.

Before I could think anymore about the difference between churches and chapels, I set off towards the Oak. I knew it was a favourite of his. My Dad had always liked it too, ever since his own Dad took him there. I wondered why – there didn’t seem to be anything special about it. Maybe it was the perfect balance of what they wanted, whether that was noise or smoke or beer. It was an odd one though.

‘Afternoon,’ said Little Dave, immediately a lot friendlier than the Crossed Swords’ barman. ‘What brings you here in the afternoon, Seren? You looking for Steve?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘has he been in?’ Little Dave had been around since I was a girl. He was a short man with a wiry grey beard and hair that seemed to stick right up all over. He had always made me think of a hedgehog, a Beatrix Potter animal that smelled of tobacco and old beer. Even when I’d grown up and Steve had told me that Little Dave’s yearly holiday was actually some sort of week off to have sex with strangers, he still managed to come across as quite charming.

‘A while back. Maybe just before two? He stayed for an hour or so.’ He leaned on the bar and looked around him. It was pretty quiet except for one or two men scattered around the room. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it’s...it’s complicated.’

He nodded. ‘Seen him in here a lot, Seren. I just serve the beer, and it’s nice making a living, but...’ He trailed off.

‘Well, today-’ I stopped myself. I liked Little Dave but I had never opened up to him about something like this before. I wasn’t going to start now. ‘I’ve just got to find him.’

‘Enough’s enough, right?’ said Little Dave. ‘I didn’t catch where he was next headed, mind, but I think it was probably downtown. He doesn’t really favour the other pubs up top here. Different crowds, you know?’

I did know. For some reason, Steve never said anything about going to the Hope or the other place on the corner. Different crowds went to different places and claimed them, I suppose. ‘Thank you, Dave.’ I turned to leave, then, feeling rude, turned back and asked ‘How was your holiday? Devon, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah, cracking,’ he said, ‘lots of museums, and I managed to catch a vintage car show.’

I giggled. He didn’t know that Steve had told me about his dirty holidays. ‘Sounds wonderful.’

He arched an eyebrow. ‘It was. Good luck finding Steve. I’m sure he’ll turn up somewhere.’

‘He’d better,’ I said, smiling too widely. ‘He’d better.’

As I walked down past New Way, I almost ran into Gareth again. ‘No need to rush,’ he said, after I apologised. ‘There’s time enough in a day.’

‘Not today,’ I said. ‘I’m looking for my husband. He left our daughter at home alone and...’ I didn’t know why I had told him this.

‘Steve. Steven. Stevie.’ The old man frowned and scratched his nose. I could see the long white hairs poking out of his nostrils. ‘Well, that’s not good.’

‘It’s certainly not,’ I said. ‘I mean, this isn’t normal, obviously. Sorry. He’s a very good father. He’s a very good husband. Sorry.’

‘Billy’s brew,’ said Gareth, looking at me like he’d just remembered something.

‘Pardon?’

‘We were drinking Billy’s brew, about an hour ago,’ he said, ‘or longer? I’ve always liked Billy’s brew.’ He smiled. ‘At the York. With Steve. I was talking to him there. When I went back.’

‘He was in the York? Is that what you’re saying, Gareth?’

He frowned. ‘Gareth?’ His smile returned as quickly as it had disappeared. ‘Yes, that’s me. Not everyone calls me that, of course. Steve does though. We were just in the York.’

‘An hour ago?’ I asked. ‘Is he still there now?’

‘An hour...I think. Time does get away from me.’ He took a pocket watch out of his jacket. ‘Here we are. Yes, that is it. Come along.’ He turned and started walking back to the York.

‘Gareth, is he still there now?’ I said, jogging to catch up with him. He was moving pretty quickly for his age.

‘I don’t remember. All in good time,’ he called back over his shoulder, his voice hoarse on the last few words. When we reached the York, he stood to look up at the building. I’d always thought it looked more like someone’s house than a pub. In fact the only concession to its nature as a pub – on the outside, at least – was the sign hanging off a pole above the door. ‘Do you know, the brewery here is one of the oldest in this town?’ said Gareth. ‘Marvellous.’

‘Is that where Billy makes his brew?’ I asked, humouring him.

‘Billy?’ He raised one eyebrow. ‘Billy’s been dead for years.’ Before I could reply, he pushed the door open and strolled inside. ‘Jackie,’ he said, bellowing like an over-the-top actor or preacher, ‘have you-’

‘Seren!’ Jackie the York came jogging around the bar to hug me. ‘I didn’t know how to get hold of you!’

‘Is it Steve?’ I said. ‘Is he here?’

‘He just came back,’ she said, ‘told me he was going home, but he went out into the back. I left him sitting in the garden.’ She frowned. ‘He’s utterly arseholed.’

I looked at Gareth. ‘You didn’t tell me that!’

‘You didn’t ask.’ He looked down at his shoes. ‘We’d best go make sure he’s taking in plenty of air. The salty sea air, it always makes me feel a lot better. Down there, by the sea.’

I took a deep breath. I would not rage at him, he was an old man and probably not in his right state of mind. I wondered if Gareth had always been like this and had taken to drink regardless, or if all his nonsense talk had come from boozing. ‘Outside then,’ I said. Jackie nodded, and we turned to walk through the tiny room that was the York pub. I’d always liked the York, probably because it was so cosy. Like being in someone’s living room, my parents had always agreed. It seemed to have always been there. Like it would always be.

We passed through a small corridor to a peeling white door and headed out into the garden. There, I saw Steve properly for the first time in months. I mean,

we'd sat down for breakfast and lunch and dinner and taken Joanna out for walks and sweated together at night but I really saw him then. He was wearing a black button down shirt and a pair of dark blue jeans he seemed to have had since he was a teenager. In fact, I remembered when Helen and I had first seen him wearing them. Here in Pembroke, wearing jeans had still seemed a little daring and racy. But in the York's garden, he didn't look sexy at all.

He was sitting on the lawn with his legs open, plucking at the grass. There were smears of dusty mud up his shirtsleeves and streaks on his back, as if he'd been making dirt angels. 'I thought he was going to fall asleep,' said Jackie, 'I wanted to stay out here and keep an eye. I was just about to lock the front door when you came in.'

I wasn't really listening. I was still looking at Steve, and wondering how long he'd really been like this. He looked like an overgrown feral child. I found myself thinking about his farts at night. Ugly, toxic breaths from his underpants that made him garble giggles. They'd been truly horrible for a while now. Noxious. 'Steve.' I didn't raise my voice.

He looked up with that same awful giggly-fart face that normally graced bedtime. It was seeing it in the daylight that made it seem real. This was a problem, I realised, and not just something I could keep saying would be fixed. I waited for his apology. I waited for him to get angry for coming to find him. I waited for him to get sad and tell me to go away, that he was ashamed. I waited for the hurt.

'I love you,' he said, then burped and tried to stand by pushing himself to his feet. His untucked shirt lifted as he rolled forward, a layer of pale fat on his back hanging over the back of those jeans. I grimaced as I watched him fall back down into his sitting position and cover his mouth. He burped again, louder. It sounded wet.

'I didn't know what to do,' said Jackie, uselessly.

‘Love you,’ said Steve, grinning inanely at me again. ‘I love you.’ As if saying it again and again could make this any better. A string of spittle dangled from his mouth. He scratched at the tattoo on his arm and frowned. ‘Fucking...itchy.’

I took a deep breath. It wouldn’t help to fully lose my rag with him when he was like this. I’d have to hold it in me. Smuggle it. ‘Steve,’ I said. ‘We need to go home. You should have been at home.’

Steve squinted at me. ‘Why...where’s Joanna?’

‘She’s at home with my Dad.’ I made sure there was plenty of space between each word.

‘Good,’ he said, giving me the thumbs-up with one hand, ‘top man, your Dad.’ He laughed. Belched again.

‘He was fine,’ said Jackie, a little too quickly, ‘he left here not that long ago. I don’t know why he came back or how he got in such a state. Must have hit him quickly, the booze.’

It had always been that way, I thought. It just hadn’t happened that often. Steve was a strong drinker, but when it caught up with him, it really caught up with him. ‘Who was he with earlier?’

‘Well, he spoke to Gareth for a bit,’ she said, ‘but he wasn’t going round with anyone, far as I can tell. He was alone.’

‘Right.’ I’d suspected as much.

‘Sorry,’ mumbled Jackie. ‘Sorry.’

‘Not your fault,’ I said, taking a few slow steps towards Steve. He was trying to lift himself again, at the same time crawling forwards, towards the old chapel-shaped brewery. The York hadn’t brewed its own beer since I’d been going there, but the building stood impressively in the back garden. You could see it from the Commons. It looked familiar, but I put it down to the fact that I’d lived in Pembroke

for my whole life. Like a lot of people I knew. 'Come on,' I said, 'stand up. Can't lift you.'

He grunted at me, having managed to get up on all fours, his back arched like a cat stretching. He was taking deep breaths now, his eyes locked firmly on the ground in front of him. He swallowed, loudly enough for me to hear from a few feet away, and managed to stand.

'Come along,' I said. 'Time to go home.'

He stumbled towards the old brewery instead. 'I've got to...' he began saying.

'Steve!' I lost my temper and yelled. Still moving, he turned to look back at me and lost his footing, falling against the wall of the small building. He steadied himself momentarily with one hand but slipped to one knee and threw up all over the stonework. I looked back at Jackie, who shrugged and looked away.

'Oh dear.' I jumped at the sound of someone else speaking. I turned to my right to see Gareth sat on the wall. 'Someone's a bit ill, eh?' He lowered himself off, nimble as a teenager, and took a few strides towards Steve, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'Is that everything?' Steve looked up at him, his eyes bloodshot and wet, and shook his head like a child. 'Come on,' said the old man, 'let's have it.'

Steve coughed, and made a few horrible gargly sounds from deep within himself. Finally, a spray of foamy vomit splashed the grey stones again. It stank like rotting vegetables.

Gareth took a few steps back. 'Come on, lad. Good lad.' I thought of how Steve had cooed over Joanna when she was throwing up with that stomach bug a couple of months back. Gareth looked up at me, patting Steve's shoulder. 'He's spewing.'

'I can see that,' I said, nodding.

He wrinkled his nose. 'It smells. I'm sorry.'

‘No, I’m sorry,’ I said. I could see flecks of sick on Gareth’s woollen trousers. ‘This has really...’ I thought about airing my dirty laundry in public. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jackie, putting a hand on my shoulder. We all looked at each other, not sure whom we were being sorry to and what we were being sorry for. Steve looked up, a glob of puke on his chin.

‘M’sorry,’ he mumbled, and spat on the floor. He didn’t quite manage it. A long string of gunk hung from his mouth.

‘Ready to help me, lad?’ said Gareth, looking Steve in the eye. Steve nodded at him, and the old man bent down a little. ‘I’m going to need your help here,’ he said, holding my husband’s gaze, ‘put your arm around my shoulder...that’s it.’

‘You must be good with children,’ I said, not sure how else to put the wonder I felt at Gareth.

‘I’ve never had any,’ he said, without losing his eye contact with Steve. ‘Right. Ready to start walking?’ Amazingly, he nodded, and the two men started shuffling gently away from the puddle of sick. They came to stand by me, pausing so that Gareth could turn around and look at the building. ‘Marvellous chapel. Look at that stonework. You know, I’ve been up the tin chapel these last few years.’

‘Really?’ I said. I was willing to humour him whatever he said.

‘They say it’s not the same God,’ he said, ‘but I prefer to think his beard looks different depending on where you stand.’ He laughed as if he’d just dropped the punch line to a joke. ‘Up the old house, is it, then?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘it’s just up-’

‘Eastback,’ he said, ‘I remember, your mother Anna used to live there.’

‘My mother’s Claire,’ I said, ‘but yes, Eastback.’

He frowned. ‘Well, someone called Anna used to live there. Come on Steve,’ he grunted, hauling my husband to attention. ‘Let’s go. Are you sure your mother

wasn't Anna? No, was Anna the daughter?' His voice had more strain in it now. 'I played piano at her wedding.'

I walked slowly beside the two of them. 'My father's family's always had the house on Eastback, though I think he had an aunt called Anna. Maybe you're thinking of her.' I'd spilled my family's stories. It was like Gareth had a way of gently nudging the history out of you.

'I think I might be thinking back too far,' he said, wheezing a little. 'Family trees are the most confusing of trees. Except maybe for those trees where the branches dig back down into the ground.' I patted his shoulder. I had no idea what he was talking about. He grinned at Steve, then back at me. 'I didn't play piano at your wedding, did I?'

Chapter Five

The snoring coming from the bedroom was abominable. Can a snore smell? It felt like this one could, like it was climbing into my nose and ears and roaring and stinking away. 'He's on his side,' said Dad, closing the door gently. 'I've left a bucket by him. It was the one from the cupboard under the sink, I hope you don't mind. I couldn't find any others.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'You're not crying.' Dad brushed his hand against my cheek, wiping a tear that wasn't there. 'Why not?' I took another one of those deep breaths and tried to think of a reply. 'Angry, am I right?'

'Yes. And sad,' I said, 'but I think anger is heavier on the scales now.'

'Yes, well, that I can imagine.' He turned to head down the hall. 'I'd better offer our guest a cup of tea.' I lingered for a moment with the rattle of Steve's snoring through the bedroom door, then followed him downstairs. Gareth was sitting on the sofa in the front room. I noticed that there was a record on the turntable and went over to put it away.

'Thank you,' I said, as I looked around for the LP sleeve.

'It's quite all right,' he said. 'And you've thanked me already.'

Dad came back in the room carrying the tea tray. I thought about the few times Steve had carried it recently. The rattling of the cups in their saucers on Sunday afternoons. 'Milk and sugar, Gareth?' asked Dad.

'Just black, please,' said Gareth. 'From when I was living on Caldey Island, see.'

'Oh, a monk in our midst?' said Dad, smiling. 'So you had to take your tea in its most basic way? No milk or sugar?'

'No,' said Gareth, 'I just liked it that way then, too.' He chuckled. 'How's the lad doing?'

‘He’s sleeping,’ I said, pointing to the door. ‘He’ll probably need a few hours.’

‘Mumma!’ Joanna came in, clutching the record cover I was after. *Goats Head Soup* again.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ said Dad, ‘I had to put some music on to get her off to sleep earlier, she picked that one. Seemed very keen on the cover.’

‘Vick!’ said Joanna, proudly holding up Mick Jagger’s wobbly yellow face.

‘Who’s that then?’ asked Gareth. Joanna looked at him, surprised, as if she’d never seen anyone so old before. Come to think of it, she probably hadn’t seen anyone that old before. He leaned forward, his hands on his knees. ‘Hello there, little one.’

She approached him carefully, clutching the cover tight to her chest. ‘Lo.’

“Lo to you too. Who’s Vick?”

‘Vick’s the man,’ said Joanna, ‘he sings all the songs.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ said Gareth. He started singing something quietly. Sounded a bit like he was saying ‘start it up’. He frowned. ‘You wouldn’t know that song, sorry.’

‘I know the song,’ said Joanna. ‘Andie, Aaaaandie.’ I crouched down next to her. She was singing ‘Angie’, in her own way.

‘Is that your favourite song?’ I asked. She nodded ecstatically and presented the cover to me. I took it gratefully. ‘You’re a little angel, Joanna.’

‘Jojo!’ she said, holding her tiny fists up victoriously. ‘I helped Granddad.’

‘She got the teaspoons from the drawer for me,’ said Dad. ‘My munchkin tea assistant.’ He stood up. ‘I’d better call your mother, make sure she knows what’s going on.’

‘You haven’t called her since you went out?’ I asked.

‘She’ll be fine,’ said Dad. He was right, of course. My parents seemed to be entirely capable of leading separate lives, without one having to look after the other. Solo acts. ‘I let her know where I was earlier. This’ll just be a quick check-in.’ He left to use the phone in the hallway.

I put *Goats Head Soup* away as Gareth pretended to remove one of his fingers, to Joanna’s delight and horror. ‘How?’ she asked.

‘I’m magic,’ said the old man, and pretended to take her nose off her.

‘Hey!’ she said.

He lifted his thumb – the ‘nose’ – up to his eyes to look at it, before putting it back on her. ‘It suits you better than me, I think.’

‘Mine.’ She wrapped her fingers around her nose for protection.

‘She never gets so excited when I do things like that,’ I said.

‘Maybe you just need a bit more magic in your act,’ said Gareth. ‘What do you think, Jojo?’

‘Magic Mummy!’ She held her little fists up again. I liked how quickly Gareth caught on to calling her Jojo.

‘I find it hard being magic,’ I said, smiling, but feeling a bit sad at how quickly I came out with it. I was normally worrying about something or someone. Helen had always been the zany one.

‘Auntie Helen is a magic,’ said Joanna.

‘How did you...?’ I looked at her, mystified. She looked blankly back at me.

‘Who’s Auntie Helen then?’ asked Gareth.

‘Mumma friend,’ said Joanna, pointing at me.

‘I was just thinking about Helen,’ I said. ‘Did you know that, Joanna? Did you...?’ I wasn’t sure how to phrase it. Did she...read me?

She didn't answer. She was busy rifling through the small toybox in the corner of the room. 'You know,' said Gareth, pausing to take a long, loud slurping sip of his tea, 'I think children know more than they let on. Like animals.' He turned and opened the curtain behind him a fraction, peering out into the day that had greyed over. 'I like birds,' he said.

'Really?' I was never sure how much of what Gareth said was meant to flow like a normal conversation.

'They fly about, they sing...they definitely know something we don't,' he said, and grinned at Joanna. 'What's your favourite kind of bird, Jojo?'

She held a hand up as if to silence him and turned back to her toybox, taking out a yellow rubber duck. 'Joanna,' I said, 'shouldn't that be in the bathroom?'

She shook her head vigorously. 'Duck goes...duck goes in the box!' She offered it to Gareth. 'Quack quack.'

'Caw, caw,' he said back. 'That was more of a seabird, I'm sorry.'

'Caw-caw!' said Joanna, jumping up and down. 'Caw-caw!'

'All right, Joanna,' I said, 'keep it a bit quieter. Daddy's sleeping upstairs.'

'Sssssh.' She covered her mouth and stood perfectly still.

'She's behaving herself because you're here,' I said, smiling at Gareth.

'I think she's very well behaved. She's got a lot of love in her.' He stood to his feet, groaning slightly. 'A lot of love.' Just for a second, I thought I'd heard him say that before, but it was only for a second. Like déjà vu. As if I'd heard it in a dream, or plucked it warm from someone else's memory.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. I could still just about hear Steve snoring. Smell Steve snoring. 'We try. With the love. It's all you need, really.' Snore, snore.

'No, no,' said Gareth, putting his cup and saucer down on the dining table. 'Is that all right there?' I nodded. 'I mean, I know that there's a lot of love in her. I was

told.’ He tapped his head with his index finger. ‘She had it passed down to her. I was told.’

I bit my lip. It’s easy enough humouring the helpful old man, I thought, but there was always the risk that he’s actually totally barmy. I stopped myself asking ‘who told you?’ and settled on ‘Really?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘God told me. Last night.’ He took my hand in his. The skin was so incredibly soft. I didn’t think I’d ever felt such soft skin, on a man or a woman. ‘He told me that all of this will be fine. With Steve. Last night. Or the night before. Or...that night sixty-one years ago.’ He let go. The sixty-one years he apparently thought were important enough to be specific about apparently went with it. ‘Now, if you’ll please excuse me, I believe I have to go and have my dinner.’

‘You believe...?’ I was still thinking about how soft his hands were. ‘Oh, of course, Gareth. We’ve kept you quite long enough.’

He lowered his voice as we went out into the hall, seeing that Dad was still on the phone. ‘No bother, no bother at all,’ said Gareth. He shuffled towards the front door, seeming a million miles away from the strong man who had carried my husband home. His now-slouching shoulders even made him look shorter. ‘Probably time for a half on my way home, though just a half, just a half...got to stay sharp.’ He tapped the side of his nose and opened the door, before looking down at my legs. I looked too. Joanna was peering from around the side of them. ‘Be good,’ he said, and wiped a tear from his cheek. It had appeared without warning, no cry or sob.

‘Are you...?’

‘Must be on my way,’ he said, cutting across me. ‘Thank you for the tea. I’ll be seeing you around town, I’m sure.’ Then he left. I turned to look at Dad, who was still on the phone.

‘Well, we can boil the carcass. All right then, the skeleton. It sounds gruesome however you put it, Claire. Look, I’ve got to go now. No, I won’t be too long. He’s fine. She’s fine. Bye-bye.’ He put the phone down and rubbed his eyes.

‘How’s Mum?’

‘She wants to throw out the rest of the chicken.’ He smiled weakly. ‘But other than that, she’s keeping well. I should have offered you the phone, I’m sorry.’

‘I think I’m too tired,’ I said. ‘Gareth is a very interesting man, isn’t he?’

‘Some say he’s a prophet,’ said Dad in a silly, over-the-top theatrical voice. ‘What did you think, Jojo? Was the old man silly? I mean the one who just left, obviously, not me. You know I’m silly.’

Joanna looked from Dad to the front door, with one of the most thoughtful expressions I’d ever seen on her face. ‘Well, Joanna?’ I asked. ‘Was that a silly man?’

‘Hmmm.’ She gingerly approached the door and peeled open the letterbox, gazing through it. ‘Hmm.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘that’s the best answer we’re going to get for now. He said Joanna has a lot of love in her-’

‘Obviously,’ said Dad, ‘just look at her. I bet she got the duck out and everything.’

‘-and that God told him that last night.’

Dad shook his head. ‘Once a monk, always a monk, maybe. What’s the chief monk called? Do you think he was a chief monk?’

‘Is it...an Abbot? Certainly sounds important.’ I yawned. ‘He’s definitely not right in the head, Dad.’

‘He’s harmless,’ said Dad. ‘Come on, let’s get out of the hall. I can feel September blowing in.’

We went back into the dining room, and I made a beeline for the sofa in the corner. I hadn’t thought about how much I’d been drifting off on that sofa until then. It had become my most comfortable place to sleep, normally with Joanna cuddled up to me. I relaxed into the softness, my eyes closing, with a peculiar rushing sound

in my ears, like the sea swirling in a shell. The evening was fully arriving now. I had felt the chill from outside when Gareth left. 'I'm sleepy, Dad.'

I thought I had said that, but Dad didn't respond. He seemed to be looking at me, though, his eyes watering a little. Joanna was looking concerned too. He took her hand and said 'Come on, little one. I'll do you some toast for our tea. Would you like to see how Granddad makes toast?' Then I knew they left the room. The way you just accept things as facts when you dream. The chill hanging over the room changed into warmth and deep red. The sound of the seagulls outside, who'd followed the way of the water from the crust of the coast to the Mill Pond. To Pembroke's battlements and borders. Then back to a Little Beach for sundown. A pool of water. White wings beating.

Chapter Six

I'd been making toast endlessly. Joanna was delighted, as she loved jam on toast, provided it wasn't blackberry jam, which she insisted was 'crunchy'. My mother called around for what felt like the first time in ages. It probably was.

'How's my Joanna?' asked Mum, picking up my daughter with a surprising amount of strength. I shuddered at the memory of a particular clip round the ear after I had spilled lemonade on a cushion at the age of nine. Such hidden strength, in the firm cuddles or the hard slaps.

Joanna looked a little worried too. 'I've eaten all the toast,' she said, 'and all the jam too!'

'All the jam? That'll make you a little piggy if you're not careful!' Mum put her down and cupped Joanna's cheeks in her hands. 'Oink oink!'

'I'm not a piggy!' Joanna frowned and ran out of the kitchen. I turned to speak – in that clear, grown-up voice that I found more difficult around my mother – to her about telling my child that she might turn into a pig, but Joanna ran back in. 'I want more toast, Mummy!'

'Not until tea-time, Joanna.'

'That's not fair!' She crossed her arms tight, hugging herself, and left again.

'You mustn't let her have such an attitude, Seren.' Mum had her arms crossed too.

'Please don't,' I said, hoping to sound strong, as powerful as she did. Like a mother.

'Mind you, it's not really surprising. Remember what you were like? Always stamping your little foot.' She smiled at me.

'It's not funny,' I said, wanting to stamp my foot there and then.

‘Oh, it is,’ she said, ‘no matter how much I disciplined you. You’re so soft on Joanna, and she’s exactly the same.’ She sat down on the chair Steve had made for me as a wedding present. God, the hobbies he used to have. ‘Maybe it doesn’t make any difference, how you treat your children. Is that tea brewed yet?’

‘I haven’t made any tea, Mum.’

‘Well, isn’t it time you made a pot? Milk and one and a half sugars, please.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Mum, you don’t need to tell me how you like your tea.’

‘Sorry, love. It’s automatic, people always make tea for guests-’ She paused to look at the kettle that I hadn’t filled. ‘People always make tea for guests and I always have to tell them.’

I sighed and turned the tap on, filling the kettle. ‘Are you sure you’re having milk and sugar? Dad said you’re both trying not to have both.’

‘Why would he say that?’ She giggled. ‘Oh no, of course, he has to avoid them. I’m a lot healthier than him though.’

‘Who decided that?’ I looked her up and down. I loved Mum – of course I did – but I wasn’t always sure she knew best any more. In fact, honestly, it had been a niggling sensation since that lemonade incident.

‘Well, I did, of course. Your father never notices anything, the silly man.’

I could hear Joanna singing ‘Angie’ down the hall. I almost argued with my mother, but decided to grab the teabag tin instead. ‘Not too strong,’ she said, peering around me.

I took a bag out and turned to face her. ‘So,’ I said, ‘you’re...here.’

‘Of course I am,’ she said. ‘It almost sounds like you’re going to ask me why, Seren.’

I bit my lip. ‘Well, not why-’

‘Well, good. Because obviously I’m checking in on my family. Because I love you, you silly girl. Because I’m worried. Your father is too, even though he hides it very, very well.’ Dad doesn’t hide it well, I thought. ‘Obviously we mustn’t get extreme...’ She touched her chest, where her crucifix sat under her blouse. ‘But we need to talk about Steve. About what you’re going to do about him.’

I had thought about what to do about him. At first, before he’d woken up, I thought I’d peel him back off the mattress when no-one was looking and put him out in the street, hoping someone would cart him off. Bring out your dead. The next idea was to take Joanna and hide. I had found myself wondering if Neil would let me live in his shed.

I’d had dreams, too, when I’d eventually got to sleep myself. I’d imagined waking up to find that Steve had disappeared. I ran around town, looking in all the pubs again, in the same order because repeating it seemed important, like a spell. But all the bartenders, the rude man, Little Dave, Jackie the York, they couldn’t remember he’d ever existed. I accepted that he must have simply never been there. He’d fallen out of the world. Out of time.

But then I’d woken up with Joanna cuddled up to me. I looked at her mousey hair spread across my arm. It was Steve’s hair, but lighter. Diluted with Seren-ness. The idea of running away from him or even just hoping he’d disappear completely came back for a moment, but I knew I couldn’t hold onto it. Mum looked at me, her brow furrowing.

‘Seren?’ She widened her eyes, like a woman learning to use her face for guilt. ‘What are you going to do?’

I blinked. My eyes felt very heavy. The kettle boiled. ‘How many sugars did you say you wanted, Mum? Two?’ I filled the teapot.

‘Seren, please.’ She stood up. ‘One and half. You can’t leave Steve.’

‘Mum!’ I dropped the spoon and heard it bounce off the counter, clattering to the floor. ‘I can’t!’ I laughed, without really knowing why. ‘Of course I can’t.’

‘I know. That’s why I said it.’ She put a hand on my shoulder. ‘I was just checking that you knew that.’

‘There would be so much to think about,’ I said, ‘too much for a lifetime. How would Joanna deal with it? How often would she see him? This town is too small for something like that. I couldn’t deal with it.’

‘Enough people already know what happened with him,’ said Mum.

‘Try being a bit more blunt, why don’t you?’

She raised her finger to me. ‘Don’t you speak to me like that. I’m just being honest. Everything needs to be out in the open.’

‘Look.’ I took another deep breath. ‘It’s not what other people think. I’m past that. But Steve...I’ve thought about it a lot. You know that. I’m not stupid, I know that I should think he’s awful and has betrayed us all. But I love him. It’s true, the man I married wouldn’t have left his daughter alone while he went out and got pissed-’

‘He wouldn’t have,’ said Mum, interrupting me. ‘He was such a lovely boy.’

‘He still is,’ I said.

‘OK,’ she said. Long pause. A full minute like a hundred years. ‘It’s not going to be easy.’

‘Exactly.’ I poured the tea into mugs, even though I knew Mum would prefer a cup and saucer. ‘It’s not. But I know he’s not suddenly become some sort of brute.’ I spooned out the sugar.

Mum nodded, blew on her tea, and sipped it. She winced. ‘That’s far too sweet, Seren. The tea. And I know you think it doesn’t matter what I say-’

‘No, no,’ I said, a little too quickly. ‘Look, we are going to get through this.’

‘I believe you,’ she said, sipping her tea and wincing again. ‘I really do. But I would like you to spend the afternoon with Helen today while I look after Joanna and, well...’ She pointed up to the ceiling and lowered her voice. ‘The patient.’

‘You don’t need to-’

‘It happened yesterday, Seren, and you haven’t left this house since.’ She sighed, the same sigh as when I’d knocked over a case of jam jars as a girl. ‘You’re going to hurt yourself if you stay here. Then, you’ll hurt her.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘I’m your mother, Seren,’ she said, ‘it’s my job to be ridiculous. I have to out-ridiculous you when things get too much. Hard work, but I’m sure you know that by now. Believe me, it doesn’t get easier.’ She reached across and gently took my own tea from me. ‘Come on, put that down. Helen’s waiting at the George for you.’

‘Arranging for people to meet me at pubs?’ I raised an eyebrow.

‘Well, I was going to suggest she meet you at the Woodhouse for a cup of coffee. But she said she already had a plan and it involved meeting you at the George.’

‘Look, I really can’t...I’ve got so much to do around here-’

‘Have a day off, love.’ Mum stepped forward and hugged me. It was unusual, to say the least. Dad had always been the hugger. ‘I’m not asking you to make a decision. Just take some time. I’ve got this.’

‘Seren, darling!’ Helen was sat on a chair smoking outside the George. They didn’t have any other furniture outside – she had just taken a chair from inside and plonked it by the door. Probably didn’t even ask. Her headscarf was polka-dotted and, with her sunglasses and long cigarette holder, it gave her a classic Hollywood look. I wondered if she was aiming for that, or if she’d just arrived at it when dressing to go out. My Helen, the accidental starlet.

'I hear you're looking after me today.' I stared across the quayside. The midday sun dappled the Mill Pond in the distance, just visible around the old tidal mill building. 'I don't really fancy a drink, Helen. Could we just get some lunch?'

'Do they do lunch here?' she asked, looking right past the sign saying 'FOOD SERVED ALL DAY' and into the gloom of the open doorway. I thought about what that meant at the George. They normally kept sandwiches under a glass case, it was true. Sandwiches turning curly at the corners, and sausage rolls with a life span a sober person could never trust.

'Maybe there's somewhere better we could go. What about the Woodhouse?' I said. When I said I didn't fancy a drink, I also meant I didn't fancy going inside a pub. I felt like walking through the York to find Steve in the back garden had led me out into a crueller little universe, where everything I'd been ignoring had come rushing out into the open. And maybe, if I strode through another pub, I'd be catapulted back into my real life. Somewhere I wasn't ready for either.

But I also knew that was a silly thought. That would be like time travel. Resetting the world. Disappointingly impossible.

'Lunch?' She looked puzzled, although it was difficult to tell under her enormous sunglasses. 'Oh, lunch.' She opened her handbag and took out a small parcel, unwrapping it. It was a slightly squished pair of sandwiches. She held one out to me and I took it, nibbling it cautiously.

'Lemon curd?' I said.

'Just lemon curd.' She stood up and took a big bite of her own sandwich. 'Although mine have cinnamon in,' she said, her mouth full.

'Helen, don't speak when you're chewing.'

She made a point of triumphantly taking another bite. 'You sound like my mother,' she said, a crumb flying out of her mouth. 'Actually, you sound like your mother.' She swallowed. 'I couldn't believe she phoned me. I've never heard her on the phone before. She sounded so posh, I didn't recognise her.'

‘That’ll be her phone voice. Astounding, isn’t it?’ I looked around. ‘So, what’s the plan? Is this a picnic on the quay? Talk about...it?’

‘Goodness, no,’ said Helen, her mouth full again, ‘you can talk about it – or Steve, as it would probably prefer to be known – when you’re ready. And we’re not getting arseholed,’ – she nodded towards the pub door – ‘because, well, that won’t help either.’ She pushed the last of her sandwich into her mouth, and held her hand up to signify that she wasn’t done talking.

‘Helen-’

‘My hand is up,’ she said, ‘pray silence.’ Or she seemed like she said that, it was hard to tell when she had so much food in her mouth. She swallowed again and belched. ‘Excuse me. No, we’re going to go on an adventure.’

‘In Pembroke? In the afternoon?’ I took a nibble of my sandwich.

‘Yes!’ Helen punched the air, grinning. ‘Well, not quite in Pembroke. Come along, Mrs Lloyd.’ She started to march across the road, not bothering to look for traffic. I chomped on the last of my sandwich and crossed over. Helen was standing next to the most lurid van I’d ever seen. It was boxy and purple all over, except for the doors and the borders of the windows, which were all a hideous lime green.

‘Helen...’

‘Do you like it?’ She banged her hand on the side of it roughly. ‘It’s Malcolm’s, but he said I could pretty much have it.’

‘It’s a bit...’ I walked around to the other side of it and back again. ‘It’s like you’re driving around in a gigantic Vimto can.’

‘Oh, come off it,’ said Helen, opening the door, ‘there’s no green on a Vimto tin.’ She started to get into the driver’s seat. I thought about the glasses she wasn’t wearing.

‘Shall I drive? You’re so kind to take me out.’ I rushed to playfully shove her before she could get in.

‘No, no, I wouldn’t dream of it, darling,’ she said, swinging past me and climbing into the seat. I looked at her incredulously. ‘Well, don’t stand there gawping. I’m in a van! We’re off on the road, rock n’ roll stars. The Helen and Seren show!’

‘That’s a bit of a mouthful.’ I frowned.

‘Just get in the van, darling.’ She jabbed her thumb towards the seat next to her. ‘You can even sit up the front here with me.’

I sighed my mother’s sigh and went around to the other horrible green door.

Chapter Seven

The thin country roads were utterly terrifying with Helen's driving. There was no way around it – seeing her lean towards the dashboard with her eyes pulled into a tight squint made it a lot worse. I breathed a heavy sigh of relief when we pulled into the bumpy car park. She pulled roughly into a space, or in fact two halves of two spaces.

'I wish you wouldn't do that,' she said.

'The sigh? I'm just relaxing now we're out of town.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Well, I knew that, obviously. No, I meant that.' She pointed to the dashboard on my side. I looked down to see that my right hand was pressed hard against it. 'Seren, you don't think I'm a bad driver, do you?'

'I think that maybe you should wear your glasses, at least when you're driving.'

'I've got them if I need them,' she said, pointing to the sunglasses perched on her head.

I laughed. 'You know what I mean!'

'I really don't! I'm fine. I read before bed every night, and I can see the words on the page perfectly.' She flipped her sunglasses down over her eyes. 'Now, I don't know why you brought it up. Come on, we've got somewhere to be.'

We got out of the car. I looked out to the sea and had a funny feeling, like I was hungry. 'I had a dream about the sea recently. I think.'

'I don't doubt it,' said Helen. She'd disappeared round to the back doors of the van.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, of course you're going to dream about the sea.' She reappeared, carrying a large battered brown leather suitcase. 'It's an important part of our lives. Especially here, in this county. Everything we do relates to it.'

‘That’s not true,’ I said, ‘what about the everyday things like buying blackcurrant jam? That’s got nothing to do with the sea.’

She threw the suitcase down in mock exasperation. ‘We buy blackcurrant jam,’ she said, ‘to put in sandwiches to eat on the beach. You see?’

‘That’s silly though,’ I said, ‘you could say that about lots of things. Like beef for beef sandwiches with too much mustard. What’s that got to do with the sea, really?’

She knelt down and flipped the catches on the case, before looking back at me. ‘Why too much mustard?’

‘Because...sometimes you can have too much mustard in a sandwich.’ I tried to think about why that had come into my head. I was sure someone had put too much mustard in a sandwich for me once, maybe even recently, but I couldn’t think of who. That funny feeling like *déjà vu* came back. Someone else’s memories, wrapped up in the parcel of my own.

‘Got that right,’ she said. ‘You know, I bumped into that Gareth the other day-’

‘Who?’

‘You know,’ she said, opening the case, ‘funny old man, totters up and down between the pubs. Anyway, he was talking about a wedding he went to where the sandwiches had too much mustard in.’ She squinted into the case, and shut it again. ‘Makes you wonder where they’d put them.’

‘Put what?’

‘The sandwiches. In the church, at the wedding.’

‘Presumably he didn’t mean the wedding itself,’ I said. ‘How do you know Gareth?’

‘Everyone knows him. You just haven’t noticed.’ She stood up and stretched. ‘He’s always been around, since we were kids.’

‘He’s a good man,’ I said. ‘He helped me get Steve home yesterday.’

‘Bless him.’

‘Enough about old men and sandwiches though,’ I said. ‘What’s in the case?’

‘My equipment.’ She opened her arms theatrically. ‘The tools of my trade, dear. We are off for a glimpse into eternity.’

‘Oh no.’ I nodded at the case. ‘It’s not, is it? Not...your space invader kit?’

‘Right you are, Seren!’ She beamed at me. ‘We are going to look to the skies. Away from the troubles of Earth.’

‘It’s broad daylight, Helen. We won’t be able to see anything. Not that there’s anything to see!’

‘Exactly.’ She picked up the case and turned to go. ‘It’s when they’ll be least expecting us!’

‘So we’re going to look for aliens?’ I stepped out onto the path. ‘That hardly...’ I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. ‘That’s hardly a distraction though, is it? I mean, it’s quite silly.’

‘I think the best things in life are. Come along.’ We trudged along the path mostly in silence. Pembroke as a town had changed so much since I was a little girl. Dad remembered a time before there were even cars on the street, and I felt like I had that memory too. I mean, presumably I’d just remembered him telling me about it, but it still counted towards the history I could feel.

Out here on the cliff path, it was different. Even if there were more people around talking and living and breathing, it would be hard to hear it over the roar of the wind and the sea. There was a howling sound either very far away or just behind my head. I’d asked Dad about it when I was little and we’d gone down to the Chapel, and he’d said there was a lot that couldn’t be explained here on the cliffs. As if history, a solid, real thing in the town, was more fluid by the sea.

That was probably why I felt such a childish wonder strolling there as a grown-up. Before I'd asked Dad that, he'd had the answers to everything. Here was where the world started giving me mysteries.

Mum had spoiled it a bit by explaining that there were sink holes across the cliffs, not to mention the rocks pulverised into different shapes creating gaps for the wind to get squeezed through. But she only spoiled it a bit because, honestly, that's still pretty exciting. It's funny, growing up in a town so close to such a wild and windy coast. You don't lose the excitement of it. You just see how different it all is more often.

'Helen!' I yelled over the wind. 'Where are we going to set up base camp? Are we going to get abducted? Probed?'

She held a hand up and stopped walking. She was looking down the steps leading down to the Chapel. I caught up with her and looked down too. 'My Dad says that the amount of steps changes every time. Spooky!' I knew she knew this, which is why I used a comedy mock-dramatic voice. I was thinking of when we were teenagers and Helen had taken me to find ghosts in Pembroke Castle. Even then I'd been unable to take it seriously.

'Have you ever tried it?' she said, leaning in close to be heard over the wind. 'Counting the steps, I mean?'

I knelt down, peering down into the rocks. 'Helen, I-'

'You'll have to speak up, darling.' She wafted her free hand around. 'The wind!'

I stood back up. 'Sorry, I was just saying that some of these steps are so old. You wouldn't know which ones to count as steps or just sort of...ridges.'

'But if you did count them, they would still be different every time, I'll wager.' She beamed at me. 'Look at you, enjoying the mystery!'

'I was just thinking,' I said, 'it is very different out here.'

‘Different?’

‘Sort of...’ I tried to think about a good way to say it. ‘The magic is real,’ I blurted out.

‘Good! Keep an open mind.’ She wandered around to the steeper lip of the cliff. ‘You know what I think is strange, Seren? Because of the rocks jutting out,’ she said, sweeping her free hand out wildly, ‘you can’t see the Chapel at the bottom. You have to go down the steps to see it!’

‘So?’

‘So you can’t help counting the steps to go down and have a look. You can’t help casting the spell to get down there!’ She stepped closer to the edge, dancing her witchy dance. I watched her heavy case swinging around as she gestured to the grass and the sea in the roaring wind. I could see some people walking past out of the corner of my eye and I giggled. Helen could have been on stage. Everything was so loud with her. ‘It’s a magical-’

The heavy case. It was too heavy, and she was so small. I saw her ankle go and felt like my feet had been sucked into the ground. Dancing away on the edge of the cliff, of course it was a terrible idea. I wanted to jump forward and grab her as she tripped, but I couldn’t. It was like one of those dreams where you can’t run away from the awful thing. Only, I wanted to run towards it. My best friend, tripping over the magic at the edge of this howling land.

I think I screamed. One of the shapes at the edge of my vision rushing to the centre. Him grabbing her arm and just shifting her weight back the right way. The brown case falling from her hand and resting stupidly on the cliff edge.

The man who’d grabbed her looked like a pirate. He wore a billowing white shirt and black waistcoat, with a pair of tight drainpipe trousers that made his legs look stick-thin. There were plenty of hippies around Pembrokeshire who dressed like this, but this didn’t look so much like a costume. It felt like something he’d got right, an utterly natural, comfortable look. Even from behind, his shock of messy black

hair, some of it dreadlocked, made him look like the real deal. He turned to look at me, smiling, and my jaw dropped.

‘I’m absolutely fine, thank you,’ said Helen, standing to dust herself down.

‘You sure about that, love?’ His voice was a gravelly drawl. London-flavoured. Far away.

‘Oh, hang on,’ said Helen, squinting at the man. I thought she’d recognised him as I had. ‘It’s Mojo, isn’t it? Seren, have you met Mojo?’

Helen had mentioned Mojo to me before. He sang in a blues band that played occasionally in the George, and was friends with her boyfriend, Malcolm. Of course, his day job was that he was the council’s toilet maintenance man. I wasn’t sure what to say. This certainly wasn’t Mojo. If only she’d had her glasses on.

‘Seren, now there’s a nice name.’ The man stepped forward and took my hand, kissing it delicately. Up close, his eyes were incredibly bright, the pupils large and slightly agitated. ‘That’s Welsh, am I right?’

‘It’s...what are you doing here?’ I wasn’t entirely sure what to say. I was thinking of the record that I loved, *Goats Head Soup*. I found myself wondering if Joanna had managed to get Mum to put it on for her, and hoped she hadn’t put on the wrong side with all the swearing on it.

‘Little holiday.’ He winked at me. ‘Before we hit up the castle, of course in...Pembroke.’ He had to think about the town name, and pronounced the ‘broke’ part like a stranger. Less ‘brook’ and more ‘broken’. ‘Are you gonna be there, love?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. We need you there. As I understand it, there’s some opposition to us playing.’ He grinned and gestured to the two tall men with him. They were both dressed all in black and looked gruff and uncomfortable. ‘Not that I need these two around for that. Under orders to have them here. Lovely lads though.’

‘We can’t wait to see you play in the George next,’ said Helen, joining us. She’d been retrieving her case from the cliff edge. ‘When are you playing there again, Mojo?’

‘A week Tuesday,’ said the man, affecting a terrible sing-song Welsh accent and winking at me again. ‘That’s when Mojo plays next.’

I giggled. ‘I can’t believe it.’

He returned to his normal accent. ‘Well, if they shut down our castle gig, we might not have a choice, love. Wherever we end up playing, I hope I’ll see you there.’ He looked at Helen. ‘Nice scarf.’ He took a low, theatrical bow and turned to leave. I watched him rejoin his taller companions, patting one on the back affectionately. Then, Keith Richards sauntered off up the cliff path, looking for all the world like a pirate on holiday.

‘You know,’ said Helen, ‘you really can’t hear that Welsh accent when he sings.’

Chapter Eight

'Darling, it was definitely Mojo.' Helen was piling stones up around the legs of her telescope to keep it in place. She'd taken me out to the little beach with no name to look for aliens in broad daylight. I hadn't been there in so long, and yet...there was something recent that had happened here, I thought.

'Helen, I'm telling you. It was Keith.'

'What would the Rolling Stones be doing in Pembrokeshire, Seren?'

'Playing a gig at the castle! The one we're going to!' I said, exasperated.

'But that's weeks off. It might not even happen.'

'I'm telling you,' I said, 'Keith Richards just saved your life.'

'Nonsense. You just had a panic delusion hallucination thing because for a second you thought you were going to see your best friend fall off a cliff and splatter all over the rocks below.' She adjusted the telescope, pointing it away from the sun. 'We couldn't possibly have just met Keith from the Rolling Stones. Now, come and help me set this up. I want to look for UFOs.'

'Helen,' I said, holding the telescope tripod legs while she squinted into the lens, 'have you ever actually seen anything up there?'

'I've seen the odd thing. I mean, shooting stars. Stuff like that. Nothing concrete.' She looked up at me. 'No flying saucers yet. But I've spoken to people who have seen them.'

'Ah, the American pen-friends.'

'Don't say it like that, Seren.'

'Like what?'

'Like they're all nutty.'

‘You’ve got to admit, it’s strange. What about those pictures you showed me? They’re just blobs in the sky. The alien spaceships look like dirt on the camera.’

‘Well,’ said Helen, ‘I’ll admit the pictures of UFOs are rubbish. But, if you don’t mind me being terribly personal here-’

‘I don’t think I could love you any other way,’ I said. Helen could sometimes be downright rude, but you could tell she didn’t do it to hurt anyone.

‘Thank you. Well, the thing is...you had Joanna christened, didn’t you? The full works, the dipping, the vicar, all that?’

‘Of course.’ Mum wouldn’t ever have forgiven me if we hadn’t. Nor would Steve’s parents. In fact, I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself. We didn’t go to church regularly, but the thought of not protecting our little girl from even the slightest chance of something evil was just wrong. ‘It’s what you do.’

‘Because it’s written down in a magic book. Which is fine,’ she said, quickly, ‘there’s a lot of good in that book. Not, perhaps, enough to go starting wars over...but there’s something to it, isn’t there? Something to believe in?’

‘Of course.’ I had been wondering about it. We still went to church at Easter and Midnight Mass, but it felt a bit like the connection was lost. I didn’t let on to Helen though. I didn’t really want to let on to myself.

‘Well, what if someone had written about lights in the sky and being taken up by spacemen first? That’s my thinking on it.’ Helen went back to squinting into her lens. ‘There are stranger things around than you can think of. Was it that? It’s something like that?’

‘Was what something like that?’

‘Shakespeare, my dear. He was right. Basically, strange things happen and we believe in strange things.’ She looked up again, her hands on her hips triumphant. ‘Makes about as much sense as it can.’

‘I think I understand you,’ I said. ‘We accept some things on faith because we always have.’

‘Exactly. For a lot of people, there just isn’t room for more impossible stories to be written.’ She sniffed. ‘Frankly, they’re the ones missing out.’

I looked out to sea, listening to the gulls cawing. ‘If you say so.’ There was a breeze blowing in gently, pushing salt across my face. It was so windy up on the cliffs, but so still lower, on the beach. I took a few steps towards the dip in the middle of the beach filled with water. Because of the sun reflecting off it, I couldn’t quite tell how deep it was. ‘Helen, it’s so funny you bringing me here. I’m sure I had a dream about it the other night.’ I’d been walking on water. Or floating like a bird. Hard to tell which, after waking up.

‘Really?’ She was back looking into her telescope, distracted. ‘I’ll tell you what I find strange about spotting phenomena...they always come out at night. Why is that?’

‘Like dreams,’ I said, although I thought the recent dream I’d had about the beach might have been in the day. Yes, I thought. It had been. ‘But you can always be surprised.’ I thought about the pool of water in front of me and imagined striding across its surface.

‘Those birds are awfully loud,’ said Helen, looking up. ‘Where are they?’

I looked around. ‘They must be sitting out of view. Do you think they’ll scare your aliens off?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Seren.’ She laughed and joined me. We walked down to the water and for a second I thought I saw rainbow-like colours in it. ‘It’s like a tiny ribbon of the ocean that got left behind,’ said Helen.

‘Probably looks more unusual so because it’s such a small beach.’ I hovered one foot above the surface. ‘Have you ever had a dream where you were walking on water?’

‘I’ve had plenty of dreams about doing plenty of fascinating things.’ Helen raised her eyebrows. ‘But I don’t think I’ve had that one.’

‘I was a little girl again, but I remembered being older. Isn’t that odd?’ After we’d put Steve to bed. After Gareth left. I’d sunk into that sofa and disappeared to the coast in my sleep, flitting back and forth through different versions of me. Years condensing.

‘Like memory in reverse. Hey, maybe you should be the one talking to my pen friends in America. Most abduction experiences have missing hours. It’s part of the phenomenon, you lose time – like drinking so much you black out.’ She grabbed my hand. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Why are you sorry, you silly thing?’

‘For bringing that up. Drinking so much you black out. While we were talking about so many wonderful, fantastic things. I had to spoil it and bring us back down to Earth.’ She squeezed my hand. ‘I know we’re not talking about it. But how are you feeling?’

‘A bit better for all your nonsense. Sorry I’m not much of a talker when it comes to these things.’ I hugged her. My Helen, my best friend. Well, her and Neil. I hadn’t told him about what had happened yet. After I left the safety of his shed and went home. Maybe, I thought, his terrible apple wine had put me in some sort of fever dream and none of this was real. I giggled into Helen’s shoulder.

‘What is it?’ she said, without breaking the hug.

‘Neil’s made some really foul wine,’ I said, chuckling again. A tear slid down my cheek. ‘You’ve got to try it. That’ll certainly cause some missing-’

CLANG

The sound made us both jump. It seemed to be coming from right above our heads. I felt Helen’s fingernails in the back of my blouse. For all of her interest, I don’t think she liked the idea of actually being grabbed by a monster from another world – which, ridiculously, was my first thought. The sound, a ringing echoing bell

sound, was more than that. It felt like someone breathing down the back of my neck. Like a gentle fingertip running up my spine. The thing in the corner of your eye, stirring.

The cave caught my eye. In fact, I had looked at it as soon as I had heard the *CLANG*. I wasn't sure why. It felt hard taking my eyes off it to check that Helen was OK, like one of those dreams just before you wake up where you're in bed but you can't move.

'Helen?' She was, of course, looking up. 'Are you all right?'

'What the bloody hell was that?' She let go of me and danced back to her telescope, peering through it and swivelling it around. 'I can't see anything up there.' She turned it down and out towards the sea.

'Nothing out there either,' I said, shielding my eyes and looking out. 'Must be a ship behind one of the cliffs.' The Little Beach was really a small enclave in the rock. We were boxed in, so of course something big could have hidden itself. Perhaps, I thought, some enormous hulk had just blown its horn around the corner. Except it wasn't a horn.

'How many ships have bells though, really?' Helen let her telescope swing to the ground. It looked disappointed. 'And look at that water. It's gentle, it's flat, it's...'
She looked up at the sky and bellowed. 'Boring!'

I was looking back at the cave. I couldn't remember deciding to look over there, I just...was. 'It's not really boring though, is it? A big loud bell without any explanation.'

'No, no, darling, there will be an explanation.' She sat down on the sand grouchily. 'It'll be all very normal. Something to do with the firing range at Castlemartin. Or some sort of rubbish event.'

'Come on, cheer up. You've got an unexplained event.' I patted her on the shoulder, and felt a breath on the back of my neck. I turned around. The cave looked back at me. It was a tiny split in the rock, really. I'm not even sure you could call it a

cave. But it looked so deep and dark, a shard of black in the white and grey and green. Where the history ran deep. 'Let's go and explore.'

'Hmm?' Helen looked up. 'But darling, what if we miss seeing something out here?'

'Have you ever looked in the cave there?'

'What cave?'

I pointed to it. 'That one, there! You must have been to have a look, when you were little. I couldn't help myself.' It was true. I felt like it was important to go looking. Someone else's memories again. And...something worse. A story, a drowning.

'If you couldn't help yourself then,' said Helen, standing and stretching, 'why are you interested now? I doubt anyone interesting has moved in.'

'Come on, you love a bit of mystery.'

'Out here in the wide universe,' she said, extending her arms and spinning around. 'Going looking in caves has never appealed to me though. It's...what's the opposite of progress?'

'Pembroke Dock,' I said, cheekily, and with a bit of guilt. Fairly sure I've got some Dock stock in my blood. 'Helen, I stood in a freezing tower at night in the castle last winter waiting for what you told me were incredibly smelly ghosts to appear.' No-one else had wanted to go with her. She'd read in a newsletter from some ghost society or other that something ancient and evil that smelled like rotting flesh had the tendency to appear in Pembroke Castle's Great Keep. I'd left Joanna with Steve, coming home to find them curled up asleep together on the sofa. My daughter had looked so small tucked under his thick hairy arm. Our daughter.

'Seren?' Helen tapped my arm. 'Are you still with us?' I'd turned to look at the cave again, without realising I was doing it. When I looked back at Helen, her telescope was packed back up in its case.

‘You’ve put your alien gear away.’ I couldn’t remember her saying anything about it.

‘Of course I did,’ she said, ‘haven’t you listened to a word I’ve said?’ She laughed. ‘You’re such a silly sausage sometimes, dear.’

‘I was thinking. Sorry.’ I shook my head. ‘Steve’s not a bad father, is he, Helen? I don’t think he is. He fucked up yesterday, but I’ve seen him...I’ve seen him with her. Joanna said, that night that we were at the castle until god knows what time, that she had the best time with her daddy.’

‘Children are always having the best time. They’re fascinated by everything, if you don’t mind me saying.’

‘But Joanna hardly ever says things are “the best”, though. It’s just really been that night with Steve and her birthday cake. Those are the two best things.’

‘Food for thought, I suppose.’ She picked up the case. ‘Come on. You want to look in that cave, don’t you?’

*

Helen parked the van outside the house, having driven the wrong way up the one-way system. We hadn’t said much on the way home, instead listening to her cassette of Beatles and Wings songs she’d recorded off the radio. Occasionally there would be half a word from a DJ between songs, a fragment of a sentence. Like curiosity over a deep, dark cave, it all turned out quite shallow. Deep and dark from the outside, but something I didn’t have the time for. No time at all.

‘So,’ said Helen, ‘how was your nice relaxing afternoon getting away from it all?’

‘I’m going to tell Mum that we were sunbathing. Not UFO spotting.’

‘She won’t believe that, dear.’ said Helen. She still had her sunglasses on, having propped them back on her nose to drive back through the fading twilight. ‘She knows me, remember?’

‘Yes.’ I smiled. ‘Thank you for talking things through, Helen.’

‘I didn’t do anything. You make your own choices.’

‘You know,’ I said, ‘you are an expert in dropping out of the world...and dropping out of the world sometimes means you get another look at it. You know, we could drive away now. Out of Pembroke. Out of the county.’

‘The Shire.’ Helen smiled.

‘Exactly,’ I said. ‘We could leave. How much petrol have we got? We could have an adventure. Hitchhike when we run out of fuel. Go and open a café somewhere that serves breakfast all day and nothing else. Except maybe ice cream.’

Helen took my hand. ‘Or?’

‘Or I could be a grown-up.’ I looked up the darkening East Back. ‘I go home. I put my key in that door. I thank my mother for this day and I tell Steve to fuck off. Or I tell him not to, as long as he never does anything so stupid again.’

She squeezed. ‘I’m proud of you whatever.’

‘You’re my best friend.’ I kissed her on the forehead, and opened the van door. ‘We’d probably get on each other’s tits and spoil the adventure. If we did run off.’

‘There’s a place somewhere where we do. Over a rainbow or in the well of a black hole, but it’s there. Across the universe.’

‘And?’ I stepped out of the van.

‘And in that other time and place, you’ve killed me for being such a pain to live with. Good luck with Steve.’

‘I didn’t tell you what I was going to say to him.’

‘I know,’ said Helen. She beamed at me and started the engine. ‘Bye-bye, Seren.’

I stepped back quickly onto the pavement. The van chugged, puffing smoke into the twilit street, an extra puff of night to mingle with the dark. The air was dry and still. I could hear someone calling ‘mate, mate...hold on,’ up or possibly down the street. There was a gull squawking beyond the houses, on the Mill Pond. My Dad had once told me to take three deep breaths if I was feeling scared.

I turned around to walk back to the house, without my breaths. If I hung about meditating, I might never go back. I thought my shoes would echo on the ground, as if I was striding across a river of glass. It felt like it should have been more of a moment, walking home, a victory. Instead, I left a dull shuffle sound in the evening air. A ghost of a heel on gritty, hard ground.

Two green eyes glinted from a corner. A cat come to bother me, hold me off from facing what I had left in my house. I tried to ignore it, even though it yowled at me and came stumbling out of the shrub it had been crouching under. It stumbled because it only had three legs. ‘Not now, puss,’ I said, wafting my hand at it. I very much wanted to pick it up and ask it where its fourth leg had gone. It bumped its head on my shin and I felt the need to run away into this little moment and live there for as long as I could. I wondered if that would be possible. To condense time, like you do in a dream.

The front door of the family home hung in the night air like the little cave on the beach. That had looked sharp and felt full of something, and yet...when I was in the cave, all I’d wanted was to come back here. To this old house that generations of Farleys had occupied. Right back before the wars, into the Victorian times. Before that. For all I knew, we’d been there since saints wandered the cliffs and fields, calling ordinary people into their faiths, their stories. Re-shaping lots of gods into just the one.

Feet from my front door. Closer. Just one step forward. I looked back at the cat. He cocked his head at me. Maybe, I thought, I could just stop and stroke him for

a moment. Then let that moment draw on. As if I could run from my fear of my front door and fall out of the world. Come back when it's all blown over, in a month. Or seven months. Or a hundred years. Or even go back. Sixty-one years, like Gareth had said. See who was living in the house on Eastback then. It was a Farley house. Would they look like me? Would they have my face?

I took another deep breath and turned from the cat. Half a step. I reached into my pocket and felt the cold keys. What would we do? Could I really wait for Steve to sort himself out? What if this was what he needed, a kick up the arse? I stood still. Just another minute out of the world. I heard the three-legged cat meow behind me. Took my keys out. There was a light on in the front room, and through the blinds I could see a broad shape that could only be him. The love of my life, maybe.

My feet felt like they were submerged in icy water. Every sound I could hear echoed, as if I were in a cave. That gull crying far off wasn't a bird anymore, it was coming from inside my house. It had to be Joanna. Laughing, I hoped.

I took another deep breath and stepped forward. Up against the door.

I could hear Steve up and about. Being Joanna's Dad. I thought I could even hear Mum laughing. There was a drawling voice coming from somewhere too...was that Neil? I smiled. Of course, I thought. He's family.

I slotted my key into its hole. I had a record to put on.

June 2012 – Something in the Water

Chapter One

‘Aberystwyth. Not where I expected to be at this point.’

The grainy photo of the seafront on my phone keeps Mum nodding, but not saying anything. I come out of it and click on another one, of the National Library of Wales. ‘That’s lovely,’ she says, and smiles a bit. ‘You should get yourself a better phone, Danny. These photos are shit.’

‘You mean they’re the shit,’ I say, nudging her. She looks blankly back at me. ‘You’re not so cool after all, you know that?’

‘Maybe not. I’ll let my record collection speak for me.’ She stands and walks to the CD player next to the fridge. There’s a small pile of CDs next to it, a miniscule part of the collection dotted around the cottage. ‘Have you heard this?’ She holds up Pete Doherty’s solo album.

I snort. ‘Waste,’ I say.

‘Of money?’

‘Of everything, that man.’ I’d loved the two Libertines albums, but Pete’s work on the first Babyshambles album was so awful that I hadn’t bothered since. Waste of money, waste of talent, wasted artist – in as many senses of the word as he could manage, really – just a waste. Richard went to see Babyshambles in Birmingham a few years ago, and the only interesting thing that happened was that he shared a spliff with the warm-up band.

‘I think it’s sad,’ says Mum, sighing and cradling the CD. ‘He could be so...brilliant.’

‘Unfulfilled potential, blah-blah-blah.’ I take the CD from her. ‘Look at the design. The handwritten title. It’s all about the myth, you know. Young Peter makes his own legend. He wants to look like someone you think will be brilliant in the hopes of being remembered for almost being brilliant.’

‘Don’t spoil the magic of the myth. Put that CD on – yes, we have to listen to it now.’

‘I’ll put it on, but I’m ready for it.’ I hold the CD case to my face. ‘I see you, Peter Doherty. I see your ramshackle folk guitar. I see you playing ‘Time for Heroes’ at Glastonbury because your solo music is so fucking awful.’

‘Language! And be nice to Pete. He’s got me through the lonely years of washing up.’

‘They weren’t *that* lonely.’ I take the disc out and pop the lid of the CD player. ‘Probably time you got an iPod dock, Mum.’

‘Probably time I took all my LPs out of the garage and flogged them too,’ she says, folding her arms.

‘Don’t do that,’ I say, ‘people will always cling on to vinyl. It’s cherishable, not perishable. CDs though, they’re the flash in the pan.’

‘Why is that, do you think?’

The first song starts. Twee acoustic crap. ‘A billion music nerds would tell you it’s to do with sound waves or compression or something. If you were to ask me, though, it’s once again about the myth.’

‘Danny, not everything is about the myth.’

‘It’s true!’ I adopt a low, drawling, sub-Etonian voice. “‘Oh hey guys, I’m not a square, check out my vinyl collection. I’ve got twelve-inch singles in my satchel. I’m a barista, but I can only make soy lattes”.’

‘Well, that’s not why I have them.’

‘No, but you were born at the right time. That’s why they’re coming back is what I’m saying – because of the myth.’ Pete’s voice is pretty good, I suppose. Not sure about the lyrics, though. Standard riffing on English folklore meshed with popular culture, but I’m not listening properly.

‘Maybe. I blame your Grandma. Some of my earliest memories seem to be of Mick Jagger’s face. Dancing to that *Goats Head Soup* album. Have you been to see her yet?’ Mum narrows her eyes. ‘Have you told her? About Aberystwyth?’

‘Mum, I only got back yesterday.’

‘So? You’ve had all day today.’

‘If you’ll recall, I spent a lot of that in bed.’ I’m feeling better now, but Christ has it been a rough one. As soon as I get in, every time I come home, Richard turns up and says we’re going out. And every time, boom. The Pembroke hangover.

‘You’ll get no sympathy from me. That was self-inflicted.’

‘It’s worse when I’m home,’ I say, ‘there’s something in the water. In uni, I manage to get up and go get breakfast and...well, generally function.’ It sounds like I’m making this up so Mum won’t worry, but it’s true. In Oxford? Five pints of lager, three vodka and cokes, the odd alcopop and I’m fine. Well, fine-ish. I can make it to the shower and from then on things get better. Paracetamol, quick tug, off for a little late breakfast somewhere.

But six pints of pissy Carling in Pembroke and I can barely manage even the quick tug the next morning. Richard agrees with me, though he’s always said the sea air in Aber makes him feel better every time. Aber. I’ll probably start calling it that soon. My new academic home to crack on with my MA. A fitting epilogue for my uni years before I find employment, far away from the black hole of Pembrokeshire. Life is good, hangover or otherwise.

‘I think you just drink too much,’ says Mum, ‘and you and Richard push each other too far. I’ve seen you. Up to the bar again as soon as you finish your pint.’ She opens her arms wide, like she’s meditating. ‘You must let yourself mellow. It’s not a race to get shitfaced.’

It does turn into a bit of a race to get shitfaced, though, I think, but I don’t say it. Binge-drinking is what we do now, it’s the norm, and as long as we can get up in the morning, everything will be OK.

Only here, in my hometown at the edge of the universe, the magic doesn't work. It's like my mechanism to digest the booze is faulty. The gears grind here. Maybe that's why Richard and I actually manage to make a film together every summer. Because we can't party like we can in uni.

'As long as it's not the same when the two of you are living in Aberystwyth.'

'Who said Richard is going to be out boozing with me all the time? He'll have his own MA to be getting on with.'

'Danny,' says Mum, in her withering "I-know-what's-really-going-on-because-I'm-a-cool-mum" way, 'I absolutely know that you're going there for your Masters because your best mate is there. I know he'll be sticking around because you're there.'

'Am I so predictable?' I raise an eyebrow, like Roger Moore. Well, like Roger Moore up until about *For Your Eyes Only*, when it stopped being charming and started being creepy.

'Yes. Both of you are.'

My phone goes in my pocket. That'll be Richard, asking if we're going out tonight. For a quiet one or four. 'I'm buzzing.'

"Coming to the pub tonight?" I betcha,' says Mum, 'that's what it'll be.'

'It's not,' I say, looking at my phone.

'A variation, then.'

I hesitate. 'It says "pube at nine be there".'

'Aha!' She crosses the little kitchen to the sink and starts filling it with water and Fairy Liquid. "'Pube", honestly. It's like the two of you have your own little language. I've been saying that for years.'

I'm sure if I had any inclination towards shagging Richard, he would be The One. We'd met at Stackpole Church School when we were four and had lived in each

others' pockets as teenagers. Even tried starting a band, getting as far as being spectacularly boo-d off stage in a pub in Newcastle Emlyn. Most of the daft things in my life were shared with him.

'Don't get shitfaced,' says Mum, dipping her hands into the sink without gloves.

'You should put on some marigolds or something,' I say.

'I have been doing it this way for years,' says Mum, 'and my hands aren't scaly.'

'Be awful if you just woke up with some weird lizard hands, though.'

'Weren't you going out?'

I join her by the sink, drying the saucepan she's just put on the rack. 'I'm not due in the pub until nine. It's not even eight.'

'Well, in that case, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule.' She puts her arm around me and strokes my cheek with a foamy finger. I struggle free.

'Your boyfriend's a lucky man, you know,' I mutter, full of mock irritation. Those years of drama club after school have left me to fall a bit far into performance when I'm joking. I think this because Mum looks very apologetic. 'I'm joking, you tit.'

'Don't call your mother a tit.' She smiles and flicks a cloud of Fairy Liquid lather at me. I hop back.

'What else can I call you? Miss Lloyd? Jojo?' My Uncle Neil calls her that. Neil's like someone else's granddad – always a bit alien. A weirdo living in a shed. He's the only one who ever calls her Jojo, and that's the way she likes it.

'Too far, young man.'

'You know, without me in the house, you could probably get away with having your boyfriend round.' I'm teasing, but only sort of. This time my

performance is jovially mocking but really I want Mum to be happy. There have been other boyfriends, of course. I know Mum's an attractive woman. The word MILF got thrown around plenty by my friends when we were teens, at least until I answered the customary "How's your mum, Danny?" with "Wet as ever" which disturbed them so much that they never asked again.

Hefin's a genuinely good guy, though. Not that any bad ones have ever been let near me, especially when I was smaller, but the world's full of wankers and an actual nice person I can get along with too is something of a relief. The only other boyfriend I've quite liked was Alex back when I started secondary school, but looking back now I've realised he was dull as sheep-dip. And from what I can gather now I'm older, he could be a bit slimy like sheep-dip, too.

'Are you still with us?' Mum waved a hand in front of my face. 'Hef's coming round anyway.' Probably to talk about moving in? I wouldn't object to that. 'What were you off in the land of, Danny?'

Wet as ever. I shudder. 'Nothing. Am I OK to come back over there or are you going to flick soap at me again?'

The cottage has always looked a bit like a cake to me. Something tasty and icing-like about the chunkiness of it. I step back into Gooses Lane – god, as a high-functioning pedant, that spelling will never cease to haunt me – to take a good look at the place. A long shot. I realise I did this last time I was home, and the time before that. Like if I take enough snapshots in my brain, I'll have something more solid to hold onto when I move to Aberystwyth in September. A parcel of memory.

'Aber.' Richard, as ever, scares the bejesus out of me.

'Ah! Christ, you should wear a little bell or something.' I frown. 'What do you mean?'

‘You’re looking at your house. You’re taking it all in.’ He steps back and hold his hands out, far apart. ‘You’re thinking of the future. Of Aber. But it’ll only be for a year, unless you get sucked in.’

‘Your hair’s receded more.’ I smooth his prematurely thinning ginger scrub. ‘What do you mean sucked in?’

‘I’ve met people there who were students like ten years ago. Still there.’ He grins. ‘It’s utterly mad, right?’

‘Says the guy who’s just signed up to hang around one more year. That’s how it starts, you know. I’m just dropping in but you...you will hang about a great deal longer, my friend.’ I hug him. It’s over the top, I realise, so I start wailing into his shoulder like a demented widow. ‘You’ll be trapped!’

‘Get off me!’ He laughs and shoves me away. ‘I know your game, good sir.’

‘Hang on. I thought we were meeting at the pub. Hence the text. “Pube at nine”.’

‘Well, that was the text, but of course you’d be late so I thought I’d leave mine at nine and probably run into you here.’

‘You say that like I’m always late.’

‘You are always late. I was able to time it scientifically. I even got a nice walk along the Commons at a good pace.’

I snort. ‘Just because you live hours away from the Oak.’ Richard lived in Orange Gardens, across town.

‘It’s about nine minutes, Danny. Anyway, shall we go?’ He digs his hands into his pockets, bloke body language for “serious business, let’s get on the move because there’s work to be done”.

‘Just a second.’ I breathe in. A man in a grey hoodie carries green Co-op bags up the lane, puffing a little. A wood pigeon coos.

‘It’s still gonna be here when you get back tonight.’ Richard touches his shoe to the back of my leg, a kick in slow motion. ‘Come on.’

The Royal Oak hasn’t changed much. It’s quieter, and there’s a wine menu up by the pool table, but it still smells the same. A little of the fireplace, a little of lager. We had to come here. We sometimes go up town to the King’s Arms, but this is where we started drinking and sometimes I feel like this is where we’ll stop. Should that day ever arrive.

I’m a bit pleased to see Douglas tonight. He’s always been the landlord here. Not in any historical sense, obviously – he took it over off some bloke called Hedgehog Bach or something. No landlord is eternal. Should write that down. But since we first came here, Douglas has been here. A former schoolteacher, he still lectures us on hard graft and pressing our noses to various stones.

‘Bloody hell, they’re back.’ He jumps back in mock surprise, Yorkshire baritone booming. I’ve often wondered what Douglas was doing here, so far from his own home. That’ll be the ancient Pembrokeshire family ghosts clawing at me, I suppose. Ooh arr, we don’t like outsiders.

‘Evening Douglas, ‘fraid you missed us last night. But yeah, we’re back in town.’ My voice comes out full English, a bit more Made In Chelsea than it’s supposed to. Plummy bastard tones. It was hard playing the Welsh card up in Oxford because the Pembrokeshire accent is so vanilla and anglicised anyway, but being in England seems to have rubbed off even more of my taffness.

‘A touch of class you boys are too, what are you having?’ I wince a bit inside. Every “touch of class” comment is tinged with reverse snobbery. Oi posh boy, how much does your dad earn? The answer is, of course, I don’t have a bastard dad.

‘Two pints of Carling,’ says Richard, waving a tenner around. ‘Good old beer for the boys.’

‘You don’t want to drink that fizzy nonsense,’ says Douglas, although he starts pumping the yellow stuff out. ‘I can’t stand it.’

‘It’s a manly man’s drink,’ says Richard, ‘we sort of have to.’

‘You know it was a ladies’ drink first,’ says Douglas, carefully putting our glasses down on the bar with a satisfying double clunk. ‘Back in the seventies. That’s what the marketing said. Lager, for the saloon bar.’

‘I wonder why it changed,’ I say, taking a slurp of the foam off the top. The marketing, of course, just another myth in action.

‘Bit weird,’ says Richard, turning to scan the room for a table. We head around the bar to the corner at the back. We always used to sit in that corner, but now a piano has been put in front of the bench.

‘Piano,’ says Richard, ‘wonder who plays it?’ He puts his beer down on the pool table and opens the piano’s lid, plonking bum notes.

‘Clearly not you,’ I say, putting my pint next to his. I flex my fingers dramatically, as if I’m about to sit in front of a baby grand and not this battered old thing. Looks like someone’s tried to turn an old TV cabinet into a musical instrument.

I test the keys delicately at first. They’re slightly out of tune but considering the general shabbiness of the thing it’s not too bad. I bump out the main riff from “Numb”, the Linkin Park song.

Richard grimaces. ‘Please, no.’

‘Funny, isn’t it.’ I search out D minor seventh, my favourite chord. I’m a little rusty. ‘We loved Linkin Park a few short years ago.’

‘The years between thirteen and twenty are not short,’ says Richard. ‘If anything, they’re excruciatingly long. And spiky.’

‘It did all seem to take place over a very long time.’ I slowly suck the notes out of a few jazz chords. I can’t say I listen to much actual jazz, but I like the sound

when I play it myself. Oh, and the use of jazz chords in funk. I look up from the keys and back to Richard. 'Ever slap the bass these days?'

'Left it at my parents' three years ago, didn't I?'

'You've been back for summers.'

He shrugs. 'No fun being a bassist without a band. Could probably still knock out "Rapper's Delight" though.'

I play a very crude approximation of "Another One Bites The Dust". 'Somewhere around there, right?'

'Don't let Gareth catch you near his piano,' says Douglas, looming behind Richard.

'Is he not keen on Queen?' I ask. Who's Gareth? Name rings a bell, but there have been a lot of old duffers sat at the bar over the years rolling cigarettes from under-the-counter noxious packages. I tinkle out the bit from "Under Pressure". Doo-doo doo-dooo. Pressure.

'No,' says Douglas, 'it's not that. He'll want to jam with you, and then he'll be clanging away all night.'

'Ah,' I say, 'bash out a few classics, eh?' I try to think what else to play. I'm rusty – nothing new, then. "Love Will Tear Us Apart"? "Ode to Joy"? "Angie"?

'God, no. It's all chart stuff.'

'D'you think he sits at home learning it?' says Richard, taking a gulp from his pint.

'He never says. I'm not even sure he has a home,' says Douglas. Someone shouts for him from the front of the pub. Back to handing the old duffers a friendly ear and a glass to dribble into for him, then.

‘I’m having a fag,’ says Richard. ‘Coming?’ He’s a bit hesitant because the official line is I’ve given up. But also because last night I bummed a few off him towards the end of the night.

‘I’ll come with you,’ I say, ‘but I won’t nab any. I feel sick every time now.’

‘Were you, ah, delicate this morning?’

‘Like a little bruised peach.’ I haul myself up from the piano stool. My legs feel weird and heavy. ‘A little bruised peach vomiting copiously. In fact, I ran out of proper sick and just started bringing up that horrible yellow bile. Cheesy dunks.’

‘Just like old times, eh?’ Douglas reappears, his hand resting on the jukebox. A little defensively, too – as if we’ll put something awful on. We will, but not yet.

‘New times,’ I say, ‘the times they do go on, Mr Landlord.’

‘The new adventure starts here!’ Richard opens the creaky door that says TOILETS and beckons me out. I smile at Douglas and follow my friend through the narrow passage past the ladies’ and out into the back garden. The old table-football table has been left out here, one of its legs cracked a little too much to contemplate sitting on it.

‘So that’s where she was.’ Richard pats it affectionately.

‘We never actually played it, did we?’

He lights up. ‘No,’ he says, managing to hold the cigarette in his lips and speak at the same time. Surprisingly difficult. Show-off. ‘To be honest, I’ve never played table football anywhere, anytime.’

I don’t think I have either. ‘Presumably you grip these handles here,’ I say, ‘and sort of...waggle the players around.’

‘Makes more sense with a little ball, probably,’ says Richard, putting one hand in the centre of the table. ‘Kicking off from here.’

‘Obviously.’ I have seen football before, I want to say. ‘I’m going for a piss.’

‘Bit early to break the seal?’

‘I had a last cup of tea before I left the house,’ I say, ‘now I’m bursting. Sodding bladder.’

Douglas is currently having the toilets renovated. Not that that means he’s stopped their usage and put any temporary ones in. And, when I say he’s currently having them renovated, I mean that for the last two years or possibly even longer he’s been ‘currently’ having them renovated. This has resulted in four urinals on bare walls, a poured concrete floor, and one sink hanging off the wall with a small bottle of squirty soap.

‘That stuff will give you cancer,’ says Richard, pointing to the soap. His voice wobbles a bit on the word “cancer”. Stay with me, Richard. Everything will be fine. Right?

‘Will it?’ I turn to him. ‘Have you followed me in?’

‘The door was open. I thought I may as well.’ He picks up the bottle. ‘Carcinogens. You wash away the poo germs and bring on the...cancer germs. Can’t win.’

I want to ask “how’s your mum?” because she’s awaiting surgery. Then presumably chemo. But I’m not sure I can think of a clever enough way to push the conversation in that direction. The classic cover-all question tumbles out of my mouth. ‘How is...everything?’

‘Fine.’ He puts the bottle back down. ‘I’ve got to not smoke at home. And I’m being careful around people with colds. In case of the immune system. Because, you know, when it comes down to the post-op chemo, she’ll have a weak one. I don’t want to have anything brewing in my body that could potentially turn nasty.’

Fuck, how does one respond to this? My mum’s never had cancer. I’ve never come close to losing anyone in my family. Well, except for dad. Who, when written down, will always be small-d dad, the shit. And, I mean, he didn’t die or anything. Or he might have done. I wouldn’t know. He’s not here.

I pat Richard's shoulder. 'I've really got to go for a wee,' I say.

'I'm not sure I'm allowed to smoke in here,' says Richard, grinning.

'Be a rebel.' I turn to the porcelain and unzip my jeans, flopping the old chap out. Wonder if dad was circumcised too? Is it hereditary? 'Listen,' I say, trickling a pale apple juice into the bowl and chasing a rogue pube around the plug, 'I'm...if you need anything.'

'Thanks.' A waft of smoke drifts into my eye line as he takes an extra large last puff. 'But – and I don't mean this to sound pathetic – there's not much that can be done. Here's something you can do for me though.'

'What's that?' That last spurt is always difficult. Nnnngh!

'Stop me if I keep listing things that contain carcinogens. Hold me back if I go on about the wonders of turmeric.'

'The wonders of turmeric?'

'Yeah, it's supposed to keep the cancer at bay,' he says, 'a useful thing people with cancer find out when doing post-cancer research.'

I wonder if Nan will get cancer? Her father, the original Danny, Daniel Farley, is still with us and he's certainly never had it. Maybe our family are immune to tragedy. Well, that form of tragedy at least. Well, at least that side of the family. Granddad Steve was not so lucky. 'I will do. What about if you start telling me about the risks of smoking?' I turn to watch him chuck his cigarette out of the door. It lands in the birdbath.

'Remind me that I will probably have a packet of straights secreted about my person.' Richard sniffs.

'Take it the...' Steady on. Let's not take this life and death stuff too far. '...the annual attempt to give up the fags is approaching?'

'Probably,' he says, 'I mean, giving up is easy. I've done it loads of times.'

He steps outside again. I think about washing my hands. Hmm...no splashback. The sink looks mighty grubby. Dare I say unhygienic? I've only been touching Little Danny. I have faith in Little Danny. That American girl in the Oxford last hurrah was willing to put it in her mouth, so I'm probably OK to get away with not washing my hands. Let's face it, if I'm confident enough to let a stranger touch it, I should be willing to vouch for how clean it is.

I've made the right choice. As I turn to go, I see the graffiti on the far wall. It's pretty big, so I'm surprised I didn't spot it earlier. In permanent marker, in large letters, someone has printed 'TEMPUS FUGIT'. Then, in smaller, different handwriting, though apparently still with a marker pen there is a reply – 'On your own?' Very pretentious.

Probably not the time to discuss the new project with Richard. Or the best time? He's always loved a good ghost story, cancer drama or otherwise. I head outside again. He's waiting, holding both our beers. 'We going back in then?'

'And not enjoy the last of the sun?' The day has descended into the orange. Gulls caw from the Mill Pond, a few garden walls and a slightly larger town wall away.

'We have plenty of time,' he says, 'it's summer. And there are plenty of other nights left for that.'

Three beers deep. A quiet one or two indeed. At the end of this pint, maybe just one more and it'll be time to head home. Possibly. Richard is telling me about the pipe tobacco he smoked the other night. It sounds delicious. 'Vanilla, mate,' he says, 'all fags should be made of it. More people would smoke.'

'And that's...desirable, is it?' I give it my best over-the-top, pompous teacher voice. He guffaws. 'Listen, Richard, I was gonna tell you...tell you about the new film we're gonna make.' The change from outdoors to indoors had derailed me a little.

‘The summer project!’ He gives me the cheekiest smile. ‘You gonna finish this one?’

‘I will! I will also finish my other films,’ I say, feeling my words slurring a bit, ‘but they’re all in...post-production.’ The only films I’d finished in uni, aside from the Pembroke short projects over the last couple of summers, were the ones I’d had to do for my course with other people. Before that, it felt easier. Richard and I had made films together as teenagers, based on this old sci-fi series, The Bernard Mysteries. We’d watched repeats on UK Gold as kids and that’s eventually why I got into making films. I wanted to be the man behind the rubber tentacle.

But then we made all these other wonderful shorts. Dire comedies and shoestring horrors. I felt like I was getting good enough with the camera to take it up as a degree. But now, looking back, everything before uni seems crap and everything during seems like hard work. So this time, and I think this to myself before I say it out loud to Richard, this time we are gonna finish it and it’s gonna be good. Yes!

‘The thing is,’ I say, or hear myself saying. The sound of your own voice lags when you’re drunk, a live broadcast, trailing just a little. ‘I want to finish this one. Make it good. I know we’re both gonna be in Aber, but we’re not gonna be...here. Pembroke. Who knows where we’re gonna be after?’

I can see the tiny contortions in his face that suggest where his thoughts are headed. I shouldn’t have mentioned the unknown future. Cancer. It’s a fucking chasm for him right now. ‘I mean,’ I go on, ‘obviously everything will be fine. We’ll get jobs and be doing things, with any luck, that we, y’know, love. But we won’t be living here.’

‘We might be visiting,’ he says, gesticulating while his glass is still in his hand. It sloshes but doesn’t spill.

‘But we won’t get anything done,’ I say, ‘because we’ll be here. Catching up with...with old friends.’ I look around, because tonight there aren’t really any old friends in here. Maybe Douglas, but he’s an old friend by default because he’s the landlord.

‘You mean each other,’ he says, before finishing his drink. He waves his empty glass at my face. ‘One more?’

I hesitate. ‘I can’t. Got to get up...got the thing tomorrow.’

‘One more will be fine. I’ll get them.’

‘Milking the last of the student loan?’ I offer a smile.

‘It’s not real money, is it?’ says Richard, already standing and collecting my glass. Of course I’m having another one. I think about tomorrow. Glass of water before bed, I should be fine. I stand and follow him to the bar.

‘Same again?’ asks Douglas. I notice he’s locked the front door. I remember the first time we had a lock-in here – my first anywhere, in fact. I had found myself at pint number eight or nine watching Richard dance with some dinner lady to AC/DC’s ‘You Shook Me All Night Long’.

‘Yes please,’ says Richard, digging the change out of his wallet. I think about the fiver I’ve still got languishing in mine, folded up very small. I’ll get them next time, maybe.

After we’ve got our drinks, which have ceased to have any real flavour other than fizz and foam, we head back to our little corner by the pool table. I want to head across the room to tinkle the piano again. I have a hankering to play that D minor seventh chord again. Maybe take it up to G major, always a favourite. The notes ring through my head and...it’s weird. Like the music is playing in my head, jazzy and bouncing between those chords.

‘Danny? You OK?’ Richard’s hand wafts across my vision. Woah. Felt like I was going to faint for a minute there.

‘Me? I’m fine, yeah.’ All good. Back in the room. Probably just a bit light-headed from the drink and fags.

‘You were just...staring. Over there.’ He pointed to the piano. ‘I thought you were having a fit or something.’

‘Would have been a rubbish one.’ I rolled around, thrashing my arms with my eyes crossed. ‘This is a fit!’

‘Ahaha,’ says Richard. He definitely says it too. Not a real laugh. I worry that he’s taking everything too seriously now that something really horrible is happening in his life. I think about what he said about stopping him moaning earlier. Probably time to discuss the project then.

‘Ghost stories.’ I hold my hands slightly apart, presentation style. As if I’m gripping some sort of invisible box. ‘There’s lots of them.’

‘Blimey, that got serious quick. Or...silly quick?’ He sips his beer. Foam moustache on his pale stubble.

‘Difficult to tell one from the other sometimes,’ I say, ‘but the summer project. The last hurrah-’

‘You like that phrase,’ says Richard. ‘Sorry to interrupt, I just noticed. It’s a thing you like saying.’

‘It brings to mind...’ I’m thinking on the hoof a bit. I do often think of things as ‘the last hurrah’. The last hurrah in Oxford was even better because it was the last hurrah. Every summer here in Pembroke, the last night out with Richard is the last hurrah. ‘It makes what we’re doing important. I mean, even if it’s important anyway, I like to think of it that way. Epicness in the planning. And that’s where we’re at, Richard. The end of the line. The final chapter, the season finale.’

‘Except for coming back to see our mums.’ There’s a flicker of something sad in his right eye but it swims back into him quickly. Good good.

‘Yes, but that’s...epilogue. What I want to do is finally put my degree to good use so when people say “eurgh, film, how useless”, I’ll be able to say “not so, regard my mighty works and piss off”.’ I breathe in deeply. ‘So. My great grandfather...’

‘Danny the First?’ Richard smiles.

‘The man himself,’ I say, ‘has been writing a book, about Saint Govan or sightings of him or ghosts by his chapel. For years. Apparently his grandfather or great-uncle or some old duffer started writing it, so it’s an inherited story. But who reads books anymore?’

‘You do,’ says Richard, ‘and I do. I read all seven Harry Potters at least once every two years.’

‘Does that count though?’ I laugh and pat his shoulder. ‘I’m joking, I’m joking, of course. Bloody good books. But now it’s all about the internet. Do you know what a creepypasta is?’

‘Haunting...Italian food?’ He slurs a little. It’s funny, sometimes you can see a drunk person’s train of thought, and watch it fall off the rails. I think about saying something to this effect, but find myself in a similar position. What was I talking about?

‘It’s like...scary stories on the internet,’ I say, though I’m pretty sure I’m simplifying it. ‘Basically, like our ancestors used to tell folk stories around fires and shit. Well, now we tell stories on the internet. Frighteners.’

‘Oh, I see,’ says Richard, ‘like that Slenderman.’

‘Exactly,’ I say, ‘big alien-looking bloke with no face who comes to get you at twilight.’

‘Twilight’s crap.’

‘No, I mean actual twilight, not the thing with the vampires. But anyway, there are a lot of these documentaries about these false phenomen...phenomenal...legends. Low budget. Made and broadcast online. And that’s my idea.’ I hold my hands out wide. Presentation to my main man in the boardroom. What do you think, good sir?

‘Risky business,’ he says, a little hesitantly. ‘Gotta make sure you’re not jumping on anyone’s bandwagon here. I mean, it’s all the rage now...but who’s to say it won’t go out of fashion a few weeks down the line?’

‘You’ve got to move with the times, man. Everything dates eventually, that’s true. But that’s how it worms and squirms its way into the history books.’ I think of when Mum and I were talking about records earlier in the evening. ‘And those history books are what I’m building on. My family have been writing about these legends for years.’

‘They ever published them?’

‘No,’ I say, and I sigh, because this is quite sad, really. ‘Each person to pick up the mantle of writing it has decided it’s not finished.’

‘And you’ll be the man to finish it?’

‘Well, maybe not finish it,’ I say, ‘but at least I wanna make my...my contribution. I accept it won’t end proper, like, y’know?’

‘Sounds like an epic undertaking,’ says Richard. ‘You have my bow.’

‘And my axe!’ I roar, and we clap our hands together in a firm, manly-man handshake. I enjoy the moment, then look around nervously. It’s all well and good getting away with Lord of the Rings humour because we’re grown-ups, but people in this pub have taken exception to us for less before. We’re not at uni, I remind myself. Can’t be quite so wacky here. For all the eccentric old guys in pubs, this isn’t a place that rewards the wacky. If you’re lucky, you get to grow up to be an alcoholic in Pembroke. That’s how I’ve always seen it, anyway.

‘So, you want me to present it then? And help with the camera?’ asks Richard.

‘You,’ I say, ‘and a good-looking girl. What’s your sexy cousin Catrin up to these days?’ Catrin had been great when we were teens as the assistant in our Bernard Mysteries fan films. My willy stirs in my jeans. Lovely Catrin. Maybe, if we get her onboard, I can-

‘Back from uni for the summer,’ he says, and I try to concentrate on the conversation and not wanking over his cousin later. If I can manage to. How many pints deep are we now? ‘She’d probably be up for it.’

‘Probably up for what?’

‘Being in your film. Our film. The Book of Govan.’

‘I like that name!’ I say, and raise my glass. ‘Right, I really have to go after this. To The Book of Govan!’

‘Yes!’ We clink our glasses together, both wincing a little as we smash them a bit hard. Nothing breaks, thankfully. ‘Although,’ says Richard, ‘it won’t actually be a book. Stories keep changing shape, eh?’

Chapter Two

The song tears through the thick atmosphere. The light follows, the inside of my eyelids shifting from cool black to a vortex of red and green. Mum's been singing that 'good morning, good morning' song almost every day she's woken me since I was a baby. I suspect she sang it to herself before that.

'No,' I say, pulling the duvet over my face. My hot breath rebounds back at me from the mattress. Lager breath, like cheesy beans. 'No...please...'

'You came in to see me last night,' she says, pulling at the duvet from the other end. I tug at my end, but I am in a weakened state. Curse you, Royal Oak. Curse you, Douglas. Enemies, all of them.

I raise my hands to my face. 'I wanted to let you know I was OK. I wasn't that drunk.'

"I'M ALIVE!" She bellows it in my ear. 'That's what you said. The door flying open, the light from the hall blasting in...I thought the mothership had come to take me away.'

'But you knew I was safe, Mum.' I manage a weak smile. If Joanna is indeed miffed – and it was hard to tell, sometimes – the way round it is cheekiness. Seems to work on a lot of people, actually.

'I know a lot of things,' she says, 'like you were smoking last night.'

I want to say I'm twenty-one and can do what I like, but I know that won't do. 'Richard smoked,' I say, 'my clothes smell because of that.' Sorry to drop you in it, mate. Had to be done.

'Well, whoever it was...' She pauses and I open my eyes to look at her properly. 'Whoever it was, this room reeks now. I mean, it seriously woofs.'

'Then leave me to my cloud of noxious gases.' I try to stretch down to grasp my bed sheets, but I haven't got the strength. 'I must rest. I am...weak...'

‘Nonsense,’ says Mum, ‘it’s half past eight and I’m making sausage sandwiches. I’ve got those spicy ones from Mr Mott’s shop, if that’s an incentive.’

Those do sound good. ‘Can I have them in here?’

She strides to the open bedroom door and indicates the space of a few feet between my room and the kitchen. ‘Would sir be incredibly inconvenienced by this gaping gorge of carpet?’

I chuckle at the idea of a gaping gorge of carpet. ‘Sounds a bit rude.’

‘Come on,’ she says, ‘you do your morning ablutions. I’ll boil the kettle and get some coffee on.’

‘Proper coffee?’ I can see the cafetière behind her, through the kitchen door. ‘Une...café...proper?’

‘Of course,’ she says, ‘though we can’t spend too long lounging around being French. I’ve put Al on to open the café today but I want to get there before twelve. And I told your grandma that you’d be seeing her today.’

‘Ah, of course.’ I swing around, my feet thumping on the blue faded carpet. Every sound and colour seems to be louder and brighter with a hangover, like your senses are on full alert. My stomach twists menacingly. I have to time the way I stand up just right.

‘At least you managed to put on pyjamas,’ says Mum, crossing into the kitchen.

‘One must always be...’ Something hot reaches up from my stomach into the back of my throat as I stand. I stop, screw my eyes shut, and swallow. ‘One must always be modestly dressed, at least.’ Phew. It disappears to the lower levels. If I defecate, shower, then pile some food in, this will all be better. ‘Right. I’m getting up to face the day.’

‘Don’t take too long,’ says Mum, ‘I told Mum about an hour from now you’d be there.’

I worry slightly about the fart that's shuffling out. It feels trapped, a sandal in a sliding door. I clench and unclench, freeing the beast. 'Aah.'

'You OK, Danny?'

'Farting.'

'Go and do your ablutions,' she says, trying not to laugh. 'I'll start on the sausages.'

'OK. I'll be ten minutes.'

By the top of Gooses Lane, annoying lack of proper grammar still fully enraging, I'm feeling a lot better. I stop and press one hand to a house, breathing in the summer smell. Ice cream with a hint of petrol. Just delightful.

'Eee.' I feel the beast before I hear it, and that noise is so faint that I almost don't hear it. I turn around and look at the tortoiseshell cat that lives at the top of the lane. I've always felt he looked a bit of a zombie, but now the scabs on his back and sides seem to have turned into chunks hanging off him.

'Still alive?' I say, crouching and reaching out a tentative hand.

'Eee.' I've never heard him meow. I know he's trying to, but his "voice" is so guttural and croaky that only the middle part of the cat language's primary word comes out. He creeps towards me and sniffs my fingers, head-butting them. I wince as I feel his scars on my moisturised skin.

'Eee yourself.' I tickle around his or her ear. She or he shrinks back, and rolls onto their side. Hopefully, at least. It looks like it's just giving up and flopping down on the road. 'Hey, come on,' I say, standing, 'there's cars up and down here. Not often, but there are.' I pick it up, feeling its tiny heart thumping through its ribcage. The skin containing it feels so saggy and thin, and the cat sort of gives me a sideways glance of disdain. 'You don't want to get hit by a car, do you?'

It looks away from me, so I pop it on a wall where it lowers itself down on all fours. I give it a little wave as I turn to go, but its decided not to be interested any more. Strange little beastie.

I take a little detour to buy Jammie Dodgers from Robbo's, the corner shop. We've always called it the corner shop, though it's not actually on a corner. If anything, it's in the mid-point between two corners. I suppose it's in a corner of the town, in a broader sense. I shake my head as I peruse the biscuits. Hangover brain; it goes many places, but nowhere useful. Especially if you tend to ramble a bit anyway.

I repress what I feel will be a sausagey burp as I pay at the counter. The girl working this morning seems to be new, or at least I haven't seen her before. I give her the shy half-smile. The understated 'thanks'. For the ones you fancy in shops or working in cafes or bars, basically, don't give them the full come-on. They're busy. Instead, leave plenty to the imagination. Was he really smiling like me at that? Was he just being friendly? These are all tricks of the trade, and leave me open to choose whether or not I act if I see her on my next night out here. You can control your narrative, like writing a script – you just need the right stage directions.

Trying not to look back at the girl as I leave, and succeeding, I step back out into the sunlight. It's coming and going as it tends to here, but the still air is nice. I look to my right, past the Hope and up at the Upper Lamphey road. I like to walk up to Lamphey to clear my head a bit sometimes when I'm here; after a couple of days, one can find oneself running out of pubs. A nice jaunt beyond, past the rugby club and then maybe a wander around the graveyard. There are names like mine in there, though I'm not sure if they're actual relatives or just dead people with the same surname. Off-brand meat.

I turn to the left and start walking up Main Street. Seeing the Oak across the road makes my stomach lurch a little, and I can only weakly return the wave from the old duffer standing outside. Did I speak to him last night? Must have, surely. Or he could be one of the various interchangeable ones I've seen here throughout the years.

I can hardly remember the guy's face by the time I'm halfway to Grandma's. The only thing that's stuck in my memory is his big old beer gut and the way he stood with his back straight. The strength in that spine, holding up decades of indulgence and sadness and froth and phone calls never made to daughters and girlfriends.

I will never be that sad act, this much I know. Granddad Steve, Grandma's dear departed other half, looked a bit like that, the poor old fucker. That was the first exposure to their world, for me – Granddad smoking in the garden after dinner, before heading out. Back straight, stomach a round shelf of flesh in a tight shirt. His big tits like rolled pancakes. A short, tight sleeve showing off the blurred grey tattoo on his arm. Some crappy Celtic knot.

From what Mum's told me, he hadn't always been that way. How could he have? He'd worked in the refinery, a year or so after losing one of the last proper Dock jobs. With bringing Mum up and having to do that job, there wouldn't have been time. But it was inevitable, I suppose. Not much else to do around here when you retire.

Aber, I think, crossing the road. That's the stepping-stone to somewhere else so I don't wind up with Granddad's tits. I will go there, do my Masters degree, and from then things will be easier. Away from here.

I look in the window of a fussy shop. I always think of them as "fussy shops". Lots of scarves and scented candles. Fridge magnets telling me that life isn't about weathering the storm, it's about dancing in the rain.

I decide to go into the shop and buy some very fancy soap for Grandma. The woman behind the counter offers to gift-wrap it and I wink and say yes. Not averse to the older female, me. Wish I could retract the wink though. It's a throwback, a device from the old ways. A lot of people say they long for a time when men were men, but I find the new subtler interplays a lot more interesting. 'The wink' is a caveman move.

Back outside, the wind's picked up. I start walking towards Eastback properly, stopping only quickly to draw a cock and balls on a grubby red Skoda. Three lines emanating from the tip, easy enough to interpret as an arcing jet of spaff. Just beautiful.

Two rings. I frown. Grandma may be old, but her hearing's still pretty sharp. Why hasn't she come to the door? I'm here at the right time. Wondering if it's quite the right thing to do, I crouch and open the letterbox, new and weirdly shiny against the old door in need of some paint. Alas, a letterbox brush. Why do people have these things? What is the demand for freshly brushed post?

I ring the bell again. Come and get the door, Seren. Unless you've fallen down and cracked your pancreas or whatever it is kills you when you're old. Granddad's was cancer – that eternal villain – but really it would seem a bit unfair if that were to creep up and kill Grandma when she apparently was fine yesterday.

I feel my toes curling a bit with panic. Don't be dead in there. I thump the door with my knuckles while calling through the letterbox. Does sound travel through brush? Or is it like outer space? 'Grandma!' Oh good lord, I hope I don't have to kick the door down.

Could always knock next door, jump over their garden wall. I'm relatively athletic. I don't play sports but I jog. I could clamber over a wall; do a little roll as I stick the landing on the patio.

Then what? Do CPR presumably. I'm not sure how but I've seen it being done. On those ads about doing it. Or in films. Push the chest, breathe into the mouth. Oh shit, there's one of those two things that you're not supposed to do. That's right, I think. But which one? And if I am pushing onto the chest, then where do I push? Surely not over the heart itself?

I feel my right hand sneaking across to the left of my chest and swat it away with my left hand. Don't need to check where your heart is, Danny. I wipe something

itchy from my eye and take a step back. Obviously I'm not going to go next door and climb over. That would be far too embarrassing. What if Grandma has her iPod in and everything is fine? I'll look like a right twat.

No, the least embarrassing way for me to save Grandma's life would be to kick the door in. I look down at my knackered converse, the canvas slightly uprooted from the rubber. Wish I'd worn my Chelsea boots. Mind you, if I scuff them kicking down a door, they'll never be properly smart casual again. Why don't I own any of those tan coloured ugly blocky boots you see contractors and generally big blokes wearing?

'I'm coming, Grandma,' I mutter to myself, gently planting my shoe on the door so I know where I'm aiming. Walk back a few paces. About a metre? Seems right. Out of the corner of my eye I see a young woman pushing a pram past me. Hair scraped back in a council house facelift but very pretty. Quite the yummy mummy.

I give her a smile, waiting to save potentially Grandma's life until she goes past as I don't want to fuck this up and really have anyone see, especially this MILF. She smiles back and her baby starts wailing, so she stops to coo at it. I pretend to check my phone, looking like I'm waiting for someone. 'Come on then,' says Tasty Babymomma, having subdued the offspring. When she's a safe distance away I put my phone back in my pocket and breathe in.

Any second now. Run up and kick that door like you'd kick an enemy in the face. Though I'm a lover, not a fighter, so not really all that used to kicking people in the face. Right. OK. I find myself stretching. Touch the heel to the bum, stretch out those quads.

I check my phone again. I've been in the process of kicking down the door to potentially save Grandma's life for more than five minutes now. I briefly entertain the notion that if she's in there, she's probably a-goner by now. But no. She's done a lot for Mum and me over the years and the least I can do is make a fair effort in case she's lying at the bottom of those stairs.

‘Right,’ I say, oddly out loud again, ‘I’m coming, Grandma.’ I try to run up to the door but it feels like it does when you try to do something action-packed in dreams, coming off as more of a skip. I misjudge the connection between the solid ancient door and my foot entirely. Of course, it should be flat sole to flat wood.

Instead, the rubber toecap of my sneaker collides spectacularly with the door. What is that made of? I was expecting a sort of MDF sensation. But this is old magic. Firm like familial love. I only have a nanosecond to ponder this before the numbness fades and the pain shoots up my toes, which probably aren’t mangled but feel like it.

Sharp intake of breath. ‘Oh!’ I say. ‘Fuck!’ This I seem to growl loudly. ‘Oh fuck, fuck,’ I continue under my breath. My fucking toes. They’re broken, they’re crushed, they’re dead. In trying to save Grandma, I’ve sacrificed my only right foot toes.

I collapse into a crouch against the door, feeling the heat on my face. I pick up the little package of fancy soap, dropped in the excitement, and hold it to my nose for comfort. Take a deep breath. There is always time for plan B: go round to the next house and ask to climb over the garden wall.

After I sit down for a bit longer. I untie my shoe on my injured foot and peel off the sock. The toes look a little red, but basically OK. I slump back, allowing the faint breeze to brush the toes. They feel like they’re pulsating and throbbing.

I’m not sure why, but it’s always been hard to surprise me. I mean, I don’t know when I’m going to get a Valentine’s card or whatever, but physically people can’t sneak up on me. My ears are sharp, and the corners of my eyes always seem to be on the lookout. So it’s a bit of a shock when a fat old man tumbles down beside me.

I jump, but don’t stand. He’s not getting my crouch-spot. I need it to recuperate before I save Grandma. I take a good look up and down the old codger before I say anything. The guy looks anywhere between sixty and one hundred, which sounds odd but is the first age that pops into my head. He wears ill-fitting

jeans, a too-tight grey t-shirt with some darker patches that I don't think are design-related on it, and a creased cream blazer. Absurdly, of course, he also wears a navy baseball cap adorned with that NY logo.

I look him in the eye. Then look back down to where his jacket has fallen more open on one side, revealing one erect nipple struggling for freedom from the stained shirt. He grins, full village idiot, at me. 'Warm one, eh, bach?' he says, his breath smelling faintly of old classrooms but mainly of strong tobacco. 'The Farley place,' he says, his words slurred a little, jabbing his thumb at the building he too is now leaning against. Hmm, pissed or stroke? It's a bit early in the day to get hammered, but I suppose, when you're old, you can sort of do what you like.

'No,' I say, 'my...friend's house.'

He laughs, a wet gargling laugh, and starts undoing his right shoe. This, I notice, is an Adidas running trainer. Mainly white but with patches of orange and blue. Just about ties together his standard boozehound look, really. He gets the shoe off, straining and grunting with the exertion, revealing an old sock with a toe sticking out. He pulls his foot closer and I get a waft from the yellow, slightly too-long toenail.

I smile at him, wincing a little. Go away, I think, keeping my expression pleasant. If only I were a bad person who could just yell at him to fuck off. 'The Farley place,' he says, again. 'You know David?' He shakes his head and coughs, a slight spitty mist settling over his jacket and shirt. 'Sorry. Not David. Daniel.'

Now that is an odd question. Daniel is in fact, of course, the name of my great-grandfather. Then again, there are a lot of Daniels. I'm a Daniel. Pembroke is near to St Daniel's Hill. This smelly old tramp – the sock is off and he's definitely earned that nickname – could be asking after anyone.

'Daniel who?' I ask.

'Daniel...Daniel Farley.' He shakes his head. 'Sorry. My memory's not what it was.' He taps the side of his head, grinning inanely again. 'Getting worse too. Closer I get.'

‘The closer you...?’ Ulp. Better not go there. What with Richard’s mum’s cancer and Great-Granddad Daniel so old and even Grandma...oh shit! I leap up. Put the weight on my bad foot. Feels fine now. Must have just been shock. ‘I’m really sorry,’ I say to the old man, ‘but I’ve got to get into this house.’

‘What about the spare key?’ The old man stands as I hurriedly get my sock back on, hopping around like an idiot.

‘What spare key?’

‘Oh, everyone should have a spare key,’ says the old man.

‘Well, my grandma doesn’t. She used to have big plant pots outside, the ceramic ones, only people kept kicking them...’ I’m babbling. Probably panic.

‘No?’ He frowns, but only briefly. That ridiculous alcoholic clown face spreads again.

‘Fucking stop it!’ I shout, surprising myself. And him. But mainly myself. No-one’s supposed to see that version of me. I’m normally so good at hiding it.

‘Hold this,’ he says, a little tetchy now, but only a little. Hands me his shoe, which smells typically of cheese. Must be that big old yellow toenail poking out of his sock. Then, he proceeds to root around the pockets of his jacket. I can’t believe he’s stuffed so much in there – he drops reams of receipts on the ground, a yo-yo, what looks like it might once have been a plastic bag of corned beef sandwiches (or possibly cat food sandwiches), a grubby paisley handkerchief...

‘Hmm,’ he says, before looking back at his smelly trainer, still in my hand, although now pinched between thumb and forefinger. ‘Ah!’ He snatches the shoe back and fishes his hand inside, muttering ‘key, key, key...’ Just when I think there can’t be anything in the shoe, he pulls out a shining silver Yale-style key. ‘There we are.’ He turns to the door and puts the key in.

‘I’m sure it won’t-’ I say, before stopping. The key fits. He twists it and gives the door a little push – it’s always stiff – and he’s inside. I look at the pocket debris

he's left on the pavement, and, unsure what to say, ask 'shouldn't you pick up your stuff?'

'Oh, it'll all get back to me, eventually,' he says, and heads right on into the house. The cheeky old fucker! And me just stood here holding his shoe! I throw the manky thing on the ground and feel my chest puffing out. Oh, he saw my fuck off face before. But now I've got good reason for it. I'm going to really let it loose. I slip my sneaker back on and march into the open door.

'Oi! Get out of this house!' I can hear the piano being played. The nerve of the smelly fat old shit!

'Danny! What's going on?' I freeze. That was Grandma's voice. She's alive! I turn around. She's standing in the doorway. She must have been out! Yes!

'There's this weird old man, Grandma,' I say, 'and he's got a key to your house, I don't know why or how, but he's just come in and...where were you?'

She pushes her glasses up her nose. I'm not sure whether her choice of track top is ludicrously chavvy or ludicrously brave in its defiance of her age. 'I was feeding the ducks,' she says, before adding, a little sheepishly, 'and, to be honest, relying on you being a little late.' Man, am I really so late for everything that all the people I love just expect it now?

'I bought you some soap,' I say, hugging her, 'but I think it's outside on the pavement.'

'Well, you'd better go and get it. Bending down is a blighter these days, and I'm all out of puff from the Mill Pond as it is.'

'Right,' I say, grinning and squeezing past her. Then remembering. 'Shit, no, hang on. Strange man! There's a strange man, Grandma-'

'I can hear him,' she says, 'that's just Gareth. He comes round every other Tuesday and tunes the piano. I gave him a key.'

‘You gave him a key?’ I think about that big cheesy toenail. That tobacco and wood breath that could melt glass at a close enough proximity. Then I think about Granddad, who I never really knew that well but I know liked a drink. Ugh, does Grandma have a type? Old pub man?

‘Don’t look at me like that, Daniel,’ she says. ‘Nothing like that. He comes to tune the piano. I’ve known him for years. He’s been a good friend to this family.’

‘You’ll have to excuse my suspicions,’ I say, leaning out the door to pick up my soap. ‘It’s just, well. Tuning your piano every week surely means there’s something horribly wrong with your piano. It just sounds like you like having him here.’

Grandma laughed. ‘Oh Danny, the thought of it! The man’s old enough to be my father.’

‘Man, he must actually be immortal or something.’ She whacks me on the arm at this, which I deserved and fully expected. ‘Feeding the ducks then? With your another one of your fancy men?’

She closes the door. ‘With Neil. Not a fancy man any way you look at it.’

I’m a bit disappointed he didn’t come back to the house with her, as I’ve always liked Neil really, strange as he is. ‘How is Neil?’ I ask.

‘Oh, he’s fine. Working on some new painting. Come on through to the front room, we’ll have a cup of tea.’

I open the door to the front room and grandly gesture inside. ‘Isn’t he always working on new paintings? There’s so much to paint around here. You could spend lifetimes immortalising this county.’

‘It’s only a chunk of Wales, Danny. There’s a lot more of it out there, probably far more impressive. Remember when we all went to Llangollen?’

‘How could I forget?’ I flop down onto the sofa. Of course, I could very easily forget. It was when I was little. I don’t remember much of the scenery. My main

memory of the trip is eating egg and chips in a café. And that the café was in a second hand bookshop.

‘Of course,’ says Gareth, coming back into the room, ‘it’s a funny place for a café.’

Odd. I didn’t think I was speaking out loud.

‘What was that, Gareth?’ asks Grandma. She fills a kettle, even though we’re not in the kitchen. You see, a few years ago, Grandma had a panic about getting older and getting around from room to room to make tea. So, she reactivated some old and frankly bizarre plumbing decisions to make sure every room in her house had a small sink and bought a kettle for every room, except of course the bathroom.

‘Overlooking the water,’ he says, ‘the one your daughter works in. Lovely girl.’

‘Ah,’ I say, ‘you mean my mum.’

‘Oh!’ Gareth does a little jump. ‘Hello. My name’s Gareth. How very nice it is to finally meet you.’

Ah. OK. Crazy old man. ‘And you,’ I say, giving him a little nod. Grandma’s house has a way of making me more polite. Must be the magic of having all that tea everywhere.

‘You must be a Farley,’ says Gareth. ‘Did you recognise the song I was playing on the piano?’

‘I recognised that it was perfectly in tune,’ I say, raising an eyebrow. ‘I mean, you must be keeping it in good order. Coming here every week. To tune this young lady’s piano.’

Grandma gives me an ‘oi!’ look with her eyebrows, but Gareth hasn’t noticed what I’m angling for. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I like to take care of it. It’s very old.’ He chortles. ‘A bit like me!’

‘Oh...no,’ I say, waving my hand. Though of course, he does look very old, especially in the dimmer light of the front room.

‘And I’m older than I look, too.’ He winks and for the second time it seems a bit like he’s read my mind. Spooky. I’m trying, but I’m really not keen on this old codger. My thoughts are my own private thing, in my own private place. ‘Well, ah,’ he says, ‘the old piano seems in decent order.’ He turns to Grandma. ‘Best be off.’

‘Won’t you stay for a cup of tea?’ she asks. ‘I’m sure Danny here would love to hear some of your stories.’

‘No, no, thank you, though it’s a very kind offer.’ He looks back at me. ‘I’ll leave you to your private place.’ Definitely spooky! What the actual fuck?

‘We’re not in the lavatory!’ Grandma laughs. ‘If you’re sure you won’t stay?’

‘No, really,’ he says, ‘I’ll go. Billy’s brew is calling.’ He patted his beer gut. ‘I’ll be off.’ He starts shuffling out, only he stops to glance at one of Neil’s paintings, hanging on the wall. ‘How charming!’

I stand, to make him feel like I feel I’m uncomfortable. The painting is small, only about A4. It’s a person stood in front of a ball of light. Makes me think of a slender alien walking the surface of the sun. Impossible. Bright.

‘Impossible. Bright,’ murmurs Gareth. The he looks sheepishly at me. ‘Oh, sorry, lad. I really am leaving now.’

‘Nice to meet you.’ I pat him on the arm. It looks pseudo-affectionate. Grandma goes out into the hall to see him out, but I keep looking at the painting. I’m sure I’ve seen it before, but bigger. Or smaller, in sketchbooks. Must be one Neil keeps doing. Why paint and draw the same picture over and over again? That’s like telling the same story over and over. Just in different shapes and sizes and colours.

‘I suppose we sing songs over and over, in different styles,’ I say. Odd, that. Speaking out loud.

‘What was that?’ says Grandma, coming back in.

‘This picture,’ I say, ‘Neil’s done it before, hasn’t he?’

‘Lots of times,’ she says. ‘I remember the first time, it was the biggest. I saw it in his shed.’

‘His shed?’

‘Yes. Well, you know, his studio. Back then it looked more like a shed or a shack or a stable. We had this awful wine he’d made himself.’

I wince. ‘I had no idea Neil made wine.’

‘No,’ she says, ‘he didn’t really do it again, after that day.’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh...it was a bad day.’ She puts her arm around my middle. ‘With your Granddad. You know there were bad days. That one was an especially bad one.’

‘Sorry,’ I say. I do feel sorry, too, though I know it’s something that happened a long time ago that I can’t do anything about now. Lives are already lived.

‘Hey,’ she says, ‘we made our way through it. In fact, Gareth helped your Granddad get that refinery job. We were happier. It couldn’t last, of course, but then what does?’

‘You sound like me, so cynical!’ I laugh and give her a proper hug back. For a moment I’m ten again and being picked on at school. I haven’t told Mum because I feel like the bullying isn’t that bad and it’s worse because I feel like I’m suffering more for something so insignificant. I know the bullies are thickoes but somehow that makes it worse too – as if I, a smart kid, could be made to feel shite by stupid kids. Grandma makes me tea and just talks through it. Instantly better.

‘Do you remember our little chats?’ she asks, breaking the thread of time between me-then and me-now.

‘I was just thinking of them,’ I say, drawing out of the hug. ‘Spooky, that.’ I frown. ‘Bit like that Gareth. A couple of times, Grandma, and I know this is going to sound really weird, I could have sworn he was reading my mind.’

‘Oh yes?’ She makes a point of raising an eyebrow but she really doesn’t look surprised enough.

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘like...I’d think something, and he’d answer me out loud. Or repeat it, like with the painting.’

‘Of course, he might have just been thinking the same thing as you.’ She smiled. ‘It’s not uncommon, you know.’

‘Maybe when you get old you get more and more psychic,’ I say.

‘Well, I haven’t.’

‘No, I mean really really old,’ I say. ‘Not just, you know, a bit old like you. Well, quite old. Very old. How very old are you, Grandma?’

‘Oi!’ She walloped my arm. ‘Sit down and drink your tea, Danny. It’s going to go cold.’

‘Let’s have some music,’ I say.

‘Was that an offer to tinkle the ivories?’ Grandma sits in her favourite chair.

I cross the room and kneel next to the record player. ‘I’ve never been much of a pianist. And we’d have to move rooms.’ I start flicking through the LPs. The myth of vinyl, that a song could be written down physically and coaxed from its black housing with a simple shuddering needle. Maybe there is something to it after all. ‘Grandma?’ I look up to see she’s resting her eyes, as she likes to say.

‘Yes?’ She’s still awake though.

‘Why do you keep your piano in the kitchen?’

She chuckles. ‘If I said something about music being the food of life, would you think I was being silly?’

‘I probably would, yes.’

‘Well in that case, it doesn’t matter. Put *Goats Head Soup* on. I’m in the mood for it.’

‘Can we start with the second side?’ I’ve always liked the third song on that second side, “Winter”. It sounds the most like a song from its time stretching out into the present, like a signal bouncing off the moon.

‘If you like.’ She opens her eyes. ‘D’you know, I met Keith Richards once.’

I’ve heard the story before. ‘Tell me again, Grandma.’

Chapter Three

The Original Danny, Dan the Man, Daniel Farley the First, my Great-Granddad, is still standing up straight. He's in his nineties, though I couldn't say exactly how old without thinking hard. He never mentions it – not like some old farts who seem to love reciting their age as if they're winning some kind of mortality contest – so it's probably not all that important to him anyway.

He's steaming the milk for a hazelnut latte behind Mum, in the café. 'Not a word,' she says. 'I've told him to sit down. Georgia's only popped out for half an hour.'

'It got busy,' he says, over his shoulder, 'so I said I'd step in.'

The place is pretty crowded. I can see a couple of cakes plated up on the counter. 'What table?' I ask.

'Table four, one brownie and one Victoria sponge,' says Great-Granddad without looking.

'He's actually spot on,' says Mum. She's sorting out the change in the till.

'I'll take it,' I say, and carry the cakes to the table. A beaming older woman and...a shy younger one? Very pretty. Lovely red hair. Bit familiar.

'Hi guys,' I say, my voice higher and more customer service-flavoured, 'I've got a brownie over here and a Victoria sponge over here?' I raise my hand with each 'over here'. It's a show and people expect it, right?

'Lovely, I'm the sponge,' says the older woman.

I put it down in front of her. 'And you,' I say, grinning like a lunatic, 'must be the brownie!'

'I'm *having* the brownie,' says the hot and apparently moody girl. Definitely familiar.

‘My apologies,’ I say, smiling harder like you should do when someone’s being an arse and they’re also the customer. I used to help out on Saturdays here the summer before I left for uni, so I know the drill. This particular girl’s rudeness definitely rings a bell though. I make it back to the counter before I turn around and look again. She’s staring back at me. Normally that would be the moment for one of my moves but the familiarity is getting to me.

I turn back and look at Mum. ‘I know that girl.’

‘What girl?’

‘The brownie girl. The redhead brownie girl.’

‘The ladies really must love you, the beautiful ways you find to describe them,’ says Mum. She turns back to Great-Granddad. ‘Granddad! Slow down. Everyone’s been served. Georgia should be back in five. Danny can help me until then.’

‘Danny’s lazy,’ says Great-Granddad as he wipes down the coffee machine’s steaming wand.

‘He’s right, I am.’ I lean over the counter a little. ‘How are you doing, Danny the First?’

‘Keeping going,’ he says, carefully using his right hand to sweep coffee granules off the surface into his left hand. ‘If you don’t keep going, you stop. Who wants that nonsense?’

‘Well, I like a nice sit down sometimes,’ I say. ‘When you’re done behind there, I was wondering if we could chat about your book?’

‘Ah, good,’ he says, ‘need to talk to someone about it. Thinking of turning it into a poetry collection.’

I’m more than a little taken aback. Never really had time for poetry, though I’ve been to a few slams. Not my cup of tea, to be honest. ‘Really? I thought it was a history book.’

‘Well,’ he says, rubbing a green scouring pad into the filter of the machine, ‘it was always more of a book of legends. My Uncle Joe got so flowery with the prose that it turned into more of a novel-shaped thing. When I was younger, I pulled it apart a bit and it became more like short stories, all connected like episodes.’

‘And from there, you’d go to poetry?’ I’ve only ever really seen it lying around. The story of the saint, Govan, I’d heard them told to me, but I’d not really read it. Come to think of it, it could all have been made up by my mad family, going back to ones like this Uncle Joe and his dad and other ones I’d never met.

‘It is all made up,’ says Great-Granddad, ‘that’s what stories are. All made up from real things.’

‘Who said it was all made up?’ I ask.

‘You did, just then.’

I scratch my head. ‘I’m so confused.’ Then, I remember where I’ve seen the brownie ginger girl who looked so arsey. It’s Catrin – Richard’s sexy cousin. I turn back around to make sure. Of course it is – sat with Richard’s Auntie Val. I can’t believe I didn’t recognise them. Being away from Pembroke must have fogged me up with real-world people.

She catches my eye and smiles a little. I think it’s politeness rather than the frost thawing, but I’ll settle for it. For now. ‘I knew I recognised you,’ I say, cautiously approaching. ‘Catrin, am I right? Or have I completely embarrassed myself?’

‘I wasn’t sure I recognised you,’ Catrin says. ‘Your hair looks ridiculous. So, Danny, you have that to be embarrassed enough for.’

The long quiffy pompadour thing, sculpted with a holding wax and careful minimal hairspray, has worked wonders on better-looking girls than you, darling. ‘Oh, it’s just what it looks like when I wake up.’ I’m fairly sure she won’t be impressed with this, but if there’s a tiny chance she will be I’ll go with it.

‘I hear you’re interested in me for your new film.’ Ah-ha! She can’t be that frowny with me.

‘Did Richard tell you?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘he sent me a drunk Facebook message last night. I assumed it was pub talk, but it was nice to be thought of. I still remember being in your old sci-fi films when we were kids.’

‘It wasn’t that long ago,’ I say, ‘we were on study leave. GCSEs.’

‘Yeah, but Danny,’ she says, ‘that’s, what, over five years ago? Long old time really.’

‘Do you still live here?’ I ask. ‘Not in the shop, I mean. In Pembroke.’

‘Sometimes,’ she says. ‘Why?’

‘The place has been on my mind. Actually, that’s what the film is about. We have this book in my family...look, it might be better to talk about it some other time.’ When I’m not awkwardly standing next to your table in a busy café, preferably. A lot easier to make a move on someone when their mum’s not sat opposite, too.

‘Send me a message,’ she says. ‘I’ll think about it. As long as I don’t have to run around a churchyard being chased by a rubber monster-’

‘A rubber monster that’s actually a glove puppet,’ I say, cringing a little at my teenage use of perspective-based special effects.

‘Exactly. I’m sure being chased by monsters is lots of fun, but I feel I’ve moved on from that.’

‘Well, quite. OK – I’ll get more details together and drop you a line.’

‘And I might have a look at it because I’m back here for the summer and there’s literally nothing to do.’

‘Harsh,’ I say, ‘but true. I’ll leave you to your coffee.’ I turn and head back to the counter, where Mum is putting more cakes on display.

‘Scary look,’ she says.

‘Yeah, but I aced it,’ I say.

‘No, not on her. On you. That horrid smug grin!’ She playfully whipped a tea-towel at me.

‘Oi!’ I said.

‘It’s all right!’ she called over my shoulder. ‘He’s my son!’

Great-Granddad grinned from behind her, holding up a bucket of soapy water. ‘If you dip the towel in this, it’ll be better. A sharper whip.’

‘Don’t encourage her,’ I say, laughing. Laughing, but cringing a little at what Catrin might be thinking. If she’s not just looking at my bum, which is what I’m hoping for.

‘You see, Daniel,’ says Great-Granddad, raising his pint of ale to his lips, ‘we are all passing these stories on. But we’re all different, so the story keeps changing.’

The King’s Arms is, Richard and me have always said, the swankiest pub in town. We like it at Christmas for its warmth and sense of time and decadence. But we always agree it’s too expensive – no fizzy lager for less than three pounds? Then no thank you.

Today though, Great-Granddad is paying. I slurp the strangely eggy-tasting foam off the top of my lager and wince a little. ‘Is your beer off?’ asks Great-Granddad.

‘Nah,’ I say, ‘just always tastes a bit like the tap at the top of a pint of lager.’

‘I never touch the stuff,’ he says, taking a gentle sip of his ale. ‘Give me something deep and nutty and, well, brown, any day. Your modern, Americanised wee-wee is beyond my understanding. Too much clarity – no flavour.’

I find myself agreeing. I'm not altogether sure if I actually like lager anymore or if it's just force of habit from our teenage pub adventures. 'Can I try a sip of yours?'

He passes it over. 'Here you go. I won't take any of yours. In fact I'd rather cut off my thumb with a Stanley knife than sip some Carlsberg.'

'Carling,' I say. 'Carlsberg's a proper weak one.' I sip his pint, the guest ale for the week. It's actually pretty good. I mean, I've drunk ales and bitters and non-lagers before, but this is rich and flavoursome. A little tang in the throat but not in a bad way – more what you'd get with a perfect cup of tea. 'Oh,' I say, 'that's all right.'

'Ah, you love it,' he says, smiling.

'You sure you won't try some of mine?'

'Really. No thank you.'

'So,' I say, 'let's talk business. I'm hoping to get a film made while I'm here. Just me, Richard, and a camera, as it was a few years ago. Maybe a good-looking girl in the mix.' I wink.

'I remember your old films well,' says Great-Granddad, noticeably ignoring the wink. 'I was just watching one on YouTube the other day.'

'On YouTube?' I ask.

'Yes,' says Great-Granddad, 'on my iPad. Don't look so shocked, I may be ninety-whatever but I keep up with things. Well, Gareth does – he came round to set it up for me.'

'Gareth, as in, Gareth the old piano guy?'

'Yes, him.' He takes another sip of his ale. I'm a bit jealous. My lager tastes a lot worse now I know I could have had something better.

'He was round Grandma's the other day, tuning her piano.'

'Well, it's sort of his piano,' says Great-Granddad.

‘Really? How does that work?’

‘Well, he used to play it at the rugby club sometimes-’

‘Blimey, when was that?’

‘I’m not sure. Before my time.’ His turn to wink, but I’m not sure if he’s joking or not. ‘Anyway, he said it belonged to the town, not him. But there was no record written down of anyone owning it. So, when the club decided it was taking up space, they gave it to him.’

‘And it wound up at Grandma’s because...?’

‘He had no room at his.’ Another wink. ‘You know what old people are like.’

‘OK,’ I say, leaning in. ‘Is that a joke about your own – and I hope you won’t be too offended by this – advanced age? Or is he actually older than you?’

‘I can’t remember, if I’m honest. And no, that’s nothing to do with my, as you say, advanced age either. You meet so many people and make so many parcels of memory throughout your life, Danny. Sometimes you get yours mixed up with someone else’s. But Gareth isn’t really like most. He sort of drifts and blurs, but somehow stays a fixed point. Like when you notice a piece of furniture and wonder if it’s always been there.’

‘That’s so weird.’ I think about long-lived people. The French woman who sold paint to Vincent van Gogh. The legend of the man who taunted Christ and was cursed to keep on living. Condemned to life. ‘If he’s older than you, he’s got to be – and I can’t stress this enough, no offence meant – pretty old.’

‘I know. You’d think he’d be more famous for it, but, well, time is just a given. Especially round here.’

For some reason I think of the expression ‘a Pembrokeshire minute’ which actually of course means at least an hour. I’d always thought it was a joke about everyone round here always being late for things. But maybe time runs differently in

this place. No wonder the summers feel like they go on forever. 'Maybe we could get him in the film. He's seen all those years go by. More than you.'

'Impressive, isn't it?' Another gulp of ale. 'He probably knows more about your family history than you do. This ale really is very nice.'

'What's it called? I might start drinking it myself.'

'Billy's Brew, apparently. Mmm.' He sat forward. 'So. This film you're planning. How long? Is it a documentary? Your mother said something along those lines?'

I wasn't altogether sure what it was going to be. The initial conception was just long, possibly time-lapsed shots of St Govan's chapel. The sun bouncing up and down as the waves crush themselves on the rocks. With a voiceover reading parts of the book.

But the book would be noticeably fragmented. This would be an intentional show-not-tell. Frustrating, maybe, but I've grown to love minimalism. It's why I find *The Lord of the Rings* such hard going as a book. All that fucking walking and mythologizing. And singing. No, give me clean broken worlds to explore.

'It's more experimental than that,' I say, though this does make me think of the parody avant-garde film I submitted for coursework in my second year of uni. The assessors apparently didn't know it was parody and marked it down. Must try not to get too lost in the arty-farty. 'I mean, not stupid experimental. Just, you know. It'll be different. Actually, we've got someone in mind to be in it – maybe she could just do readings from your book?'

'Maybe. I'm still not sure about re-writing it as a book of poems. Or one longer narrative poem.' He looks thoughtful. I wonder how much information is out there about Saint Govan. Like, actual tangible information that you could definitely see on a page and not have to dig out of the white of the paper. I suppose poetry is about that lack of information. Show, don't tell.

Then I remember going to poetry slams. My horror at that performative, staccato poet voice. 'I think we'd be better off with a plainer prose style. For this, I mean. Otherwise it might be sort of disjointed.'

'Not such a bad thing,' says Great-Granddad, 'didn't you say just now you prefer a fragmented story?'

I didn't think I'd said that out loud, either. 'Um...no, what I mean is, let's keep it a bit clearer. I don't want the visuals overpowered.'

'You'd have a job trying to do that down on those cliffs,' he says. 'Look, why don't we all go down there to make it? You young ones, and me, and Gareth.'

'Does he know much about the legends?' He is, I think to myself, only a pub-man after all, even if he is an incredibly old one.

'He's very knowledgeable. You shouldn't judge so harshly, Danny.'

Danny-One is a pretty knowledgeable guy. I respect him more than most. I mean, he's wrong about that smelly old fart Gareth, though the fact that's such a long-lived pub-man could be quite interesting. 'You're right,' I say, 'maybe Gareth could have a good look-in during the film. Could always cut him out if we need to.'

'Fantastic. I'll get in touch with him. In fact, if we head off after this, we'll probably find him sat in the York.'

'The what?' I ask.

'The York. Near the top of New Way. You know, the old place like a house.' He looks mystified, which means I must look very mystified because I have no idea what he's talking about.

'I've been in all the pubs round here,' I say. 'I've met all the old farts and heard all their soggy stories. But I have definitely never been in the York. It can't exist.'

‘Well,’ says Great-Granddad, ‘it’s where Gareth normally is around this time every day. Come on, I don’t want another long afternoon in the pub.’ He grins. ‘I’m in my nineties. Life’s too short.’

The bookshop has been shut for a couple of years now, but no one has taken on the building. The curtains are eternally open, as if the place is proud to be nothing but empty shelves. Mum used to take me in here once a week, or Grandma if Mum was working, or even Great-Granddad sometimes. I would choose something, read it, and be either fascinated or bored. Sometimes it seems like I’m not an especially literary type to other people. I loathe Dickens. I believe Shakespeare was lucky. Evelyn Waugh is more my speed – awful people being awful and tearing each other’s lives apart politely. Beyond my family, that’s the world and it’s there in the pages of *A Handful of Dust*. Mind you, I read all the Harry Potters as they came out. Great-Granddad even brought me down to a couple of the midnight releases here for those.

No, I can never help looking into the window of the closed down, empty bookshop. It says ‘here’s your childhood, it’s gone and nobody is buying it’. It’s not a fatalistic, nihilist part of me in the face of the inrush of the future. More a perfect, cold demonstration – the pages flutter by, off the shelves and eventually out of the front door. Time goes ever on and the stories disappear.

In spite of this, something I’ve been feeling since I started university and stopped living in Pembroke “full-time”, this new film project feels...good. Like my contribution to something older, bigger, longer than my own life.

‘Come on,’ says Great-Granddad. ‘I know it’s sad. No point moping about though.’

‘That was the only bookshop in town.’ I turn away from the window. ‘I wasn’t moping. I was just thinking about how I used to go in there once a week. Making my way along the shelves, from the kids’ stuff to the teen stuff to the adult reading.’

‘I’m sorry you didn’t make it to poetry and non-fiction, Danny.’ He pats my shoulder. ‘There are, of course, always other bookshops.’

‘But not here. Maybe that’s something for me to do, one day.’ I contemplate the idea of running my own bookshop. No children allowed, no sticky hands on covers. Playing when they should be reading.

‘You haven’t got the patience,’ said Great-Granddad. ‘In fact, and I hope you won’t mind me being blunt, it would just turn out to be another half-finished project of yours.’

‘I don’t leave that many things unfinished.’ I tried not to sound petulant. Great-Granddad was a generous, friendly guy but he could be incredibly blunt at times. Must be a quirk of old age.

‘Really? Your last film on YouTube is dated three years ago. And it’s a trailer for another film.’ Thinking about it, he’s right. I’d thought we’d finished one last year but I never got round to editing it. God, I hate editing. Hanging together different episodes of things in a row and hoping they’ll make sense – if you make one gap in the story too long or weird, you’ve messed up the whole thing.

‘Another film that, yes, I am intending to re-use the footage from for...something.’ Great-Granddad has me a bit over a barrel here. I never would have thought he’d use YouTube against me like this. Sneaky rascal.

‘Come on,’ he says. ‘I can’t believe you don’t know the York. It’s only a couple of doors down from this bookshop you were apparently so fond of. It was famous, sort of.’

‘Oh, I can’t wait to hear this.’

‘They had this chicken sandwich,’ he says, ‘that Mick Jagger took a bite out of. In 1973. It was in all the papers.’

‘Which papers?’ I say, laughing. ‘The Tenby Observer? The Western Mail? The Pembroke Gazette?’ I wouldn’t be surprised, though. Way back when Grandma owned the shop, she used to have a poster up for that Rolling Stones concert at

Pembroke Castle, in a frame and everything. The gig that never was. The shop, of course, turned into a chain newsagent. The poster, though, that's still in the family.

'You made up that last one,' he says. 'Ah. Here we are.'

'This is someone's house.' We're standing in front of, well, just that. Well, not quite. Definitely a house, but it doesn't look like it's being lived in by anybody at the moment. It's a dirty light colour that's probably cream in summer and grey in winter.

'No,' says Great-Granddad theatrically, 'look up! Look up!'

I see that he's pointing at a metal bar hanging off the side of the house. 'What?'

'Oh, they must have taken it off,' he says. 'Sorry. That should have been far more dramatic. There used to be a sign here.'

'Used to?' I look back at him. 'Oh, OK. This used to be a pub. Now it's not. I thought you meant it was a real place.'

'It is a real place,' he says, 'look, it's right in front of you.'

'No,' I say, 'a real place functions. This place isn't functioning. It's rotting, maybe. And Gareth isn't...' There's something moving inside the grubby window. It's hard to see what – the grime is that thick and there aren't any lights on. A shape. A stout man. Is he...is he living in there?

'I said he'd be here.' Great-Granddad knocks on the window.

'I knew he was a bit down on his luck,' I say, 'but I didn't know he was a tramp.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's living in a squat, Great-Granddad. That's a tramp, a bum. An...an indolent.'

'It's not a squat,' he says. 'It's-'

The window opens. Gareth, on the other side of it, has changed out of his interesting ensemble earlier into a surprisingly dapper tweed suit and bow tie. 'Hello there, Daniel.' He looks from Great-Granddad to me. 'Twice.'

'Hello Gareth,' says Great-Granddad, 'may we come in?'

Chapter Four

The living room, if that is indeed what the old man does in it, has the typical cat smell I'd come to expect from old people that aren't related to me. A musty dusty cluster of odours that, while not altogether unpleasant, definitely wrinkle the nose.

Gareth goes over to a bar in the corner. Of course there's a bar in the corner, and of course he'd preserve a pub as much as possible in his living room. 'Can I offer you boys a drink?'

'What have you got?' asks Great-Granddad. 'Something you've brewed up yourself?'

'I made it,' says Gareth, 'but it's Billy's Brew.'

'Billy's Brew?' I say. 'We were just drinking that at the King's Arms. Well, Great-Granddad here was.'

Gareth nods. Possibly. It's so gloomy in here, I can't really see him. 'They're doing me a little favour. I just want to get people drinking it again. A last favour, on the way out.'

'An interesting thing, Danny,' says Great-Granddad, 'about this old place. There is a building in the back garden where the previous owners used to brew their own beer. And I mean, the previous owners over a century ago.'

'That's normal, though, isn't it?' I say. 'Lots of landlords used to brew on their own premises. It would have been too much of an arse-ache transporting beer from larger breweries to smaller towns. Thank you.' Gareth hands me a pint. 'Excuse my French.'

'Oh, we've always heard worse in here,' says Gareth.

'So, what, this place was always yours?' I ask. I take a little sip of the beer. Much like Guinness apparently tasting nicer in Dublin, Billy's Brew tastes even richer and smoother again now we're nearer the source of it.

‘Not the pub. Though I have quietly moved into it,’ says Gareth. ‘You could say the chapel was mine, though I built it for everybody.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask, taking another gulp of my pint. It’s really very good.

‘I needed a way of looking at it.’ It’s weird, actually. Gareth looks taller in the shifting shadows. I look at Great-Granddad. He’s framed in the window, the solitary square of grubby white light in the room. He looks oddly thinned out by it. Everything’s blurry in here.

‘At the risk of repeating myself, how do you mean?’ I ask.

‘Come outside, I’ll show you.’ Gareth sounds less bizarre in here. Less prone to his tangents. I feel dizzy.

‘Are you OK, Danny?’ asks Great-Granddad.

‘I’m fine,’ I say, watching the dust cross the grey daylight stream. I feel pleasant. A bit drunk. Which is odd, considering how little I’ve had.

‘Bit of fresh air should do us good,’ says Gareth, ‘come outside.’ He leads us around the bar and down a corridor. Everything is old and wooden, a parcel of memories that’s stopped ticking. The darkness is wholesome, warm. I’d say chewy, but that sounds wrong...off. What’s going on?

‘Danny!’ Great-Granddad’s finger clicking in my face is frankly terrifying. Gareth’s beer must be off, which is no surprise considering it came out of a tap in his living room. In his squat-house. I’ll never accept something out of politeness again. ‘Still with us?’ We’re outside. Looks like the back garden. ‘We brought you out to get some air.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say, but I point at Gareth. Bit aggressive. ‘You should get your pipes looked at. I felt really...not sick, but not right, just then.’

‘It’s more to do with the architecture,’ says Gareth. His face has gone all faraway again. Like he’s listening to you, but from a distance.

‘Well, I’m fine,’ says Great-Granddad.

‘You’re immunised to bad beer,’ I say, ‘you’ve lived through two world wars.’

‘Just the one, actually,’ says Great-Granddad.

It’s only now I get a good look at the building Gareth is standing in front of. A small, familiar-looking chapel in the garden. I’d seen it before, on a slope dropping into the sea, roared at by the weather and the shape of the fissure in the cliff. All chapels look the same, yes, except they don’t. Great-Granddad insisted on taking me to look at churches and chapels, though we’ve never gone on a Sunday to say prayers. St Govan’s chapel sticks out throughout them all, and it’s here in a garden behind a disused pub in Pembroke.

Of course, it’s not. ‘That’s a chapel,’ I say.

‘It’s a brewery,’ says Gareth, beaming.

‘No, that’s definitely...that looks like St Govan’s chapel. Danny-One here took me there, lots, as a little boy. I have the photo of us in front of it on my wall wherever I go.’

‘New Year’s Day, 1997,’ says Great-Granddad. ‘That was a good one. Big family trip.’

‘Grandma got a bit weird, I remember,’ I say.

‘Oh, she’s not been the same down there since she went down with her mate Helen.’ Great-Granddad opens his arms wide. ‘They thought they saw a UFO. Or heard one.’

She’s never really told me the story properly, but I’ve heard it in fragments. Something about a bad day and escaping and while I remember this, I think I can hear a bell clanging far away.

‘Clock tower,’ says Great-Granddad.

‘You heard it too?’

‘It’s not the clock tower,’ says Gareth. ‘I know that sounds different. You do too.’

‘It’s not something I really pay attention to,’ I say. Sounding a bit huffy. Keep calm, Danny. What’s going on? What did I come here to do?

‘I knew that, really,’ says Great-Granddad. ‘You know sometimes, when a dressing gown is hanging on a door and you think it’s ghost because your brain goes to the most rational thing? I think the reverse of that just happened.’

‘That’s it!’ I say, remembering. ‘Gareth, I’m making a film about the spooky goings-on at Saint Govan’s chapel. The fact that you have a replica of said chapel in your back garden-’

‘It’s a brewery,’ he says.

‘Whatever, the fact that you have this is just another reason to get you involved. Would you be interested in being interviewed?’ I feel like this is quite a big ask from me. I certainly wouldn’t normally want anything to do with this old git, it’s just...there’s too much about him. It doesn’t smell right. It needs documenting. Like the myths my family have been writing about for generations.

‘The funny thing about those myths,’ says Gareth, apparently just ignoring what I was saying, ‘is that there’s such a finite amount of information to go on. You can’t draw the memory out of the rocks. After all that time, all that’s left is so many fracturing cliffs. When people stop believing the myth...the narrative collapses. The magic loosens. And I can finally move on.’ He looks a bit sad. Silly old git. ‘So many fracturing cliffs,’ he says again.

‘And,’ I say, ‘and a chapel. Let’s not forget that. And this!’ I point at the apparent brewery. Too much pointing, Danny. Tone it down. ‘Did you build this?’

‘It’s very old.’ Gareth puts his hand on it and closes his eyes. Looks like he’s listening hard.

‘So are you,’ says Great-Granddad, who joins him. The two old men, though one is definitely a lot older than the other, both stand with their eyes closed, frowning slightly. ‘Something distant,’ says Great-Granddad.

‘I know,’ says Gareth, ‘it’s an echo. Music from a visitor, a long time ago. The ringing of a bell whipped up in a storm of sea-mist.’

‘I think I can hear the Rolling Stones,’ says Great-Granddad, frowning a little harder in his concentration.

Gareth opens his eyes. ‘Houses hold memories. Even the houses of gods.’ He looks up at the pub. ‘Lots of times locked in there.’

‘Lots of times of lock-ins, too, I imagine,’ I say. ‘So, what, the old chapel here just happens to look like Saint Govan’s chapel?’

Great-Granddad opens his eyes. ‘It’s interesting, isn’t it? The easy explanation being, of course, that religious buildings of a certain age just looked the same.’

‘It’s not a fun explanation, though,’ says Gareth, patting the brewery. ‘That’s what stories are there for, though. To make life less boring. One might say you were being chased by pirates or pagans, and pirates would always be more interesting.’

‘Which brings me back, again,’ I say, ‘to my film. Come on, Gareth. My family’s been writing about that story for generations. This is my contribution. Maybe even the springboard to it going digital.’

‘Would be nice to be in films again,’ says Gareth. ‘I remember falling into the water down in Pembroke Dock when we were being chased by policemen. In that picture by William.’

William Haggart, I’m sure he means. Yes, growing up in Pembroke, I’m well aware of the fact that William Haggart made some of the earliest films here. And yes,

having studied film, I know that he invented the chase sequence and the pan shot while making those films. I'm starting to think someone's playing a prank on me.

'OK.' I hold my hands up. 'You say whatever you want. I've got to sort some specifics out, then we'll be in touch about picking you up.'

Pulling together some semblance of a script from a book that's over a hundred years old, which has been copied and re-typed every time, over a couple of days is not easy. But I've managed it, and fired said script off to Richard and Catrin. It's more like a series of loose improvised stage directions, but I've managed it. As long as we get the shots in, the visuals, we can over-dub the information later. If people want to learn more, they can always read a book.

Come to think of it, this project could be the beginning of a longer film about Pembrokeshire myths, once I've got a handle on it. I can delve further into the world of Welsh legends – maybe even as far as Carmarthen. Get my Merlyn on.

The horn beeps and I jump off the wall. Richard peers out of the car window. 'Deep in thought, Danny?'

'Did you like the stuff about Saint Govan being Arthur's knight Gawain?' I say, getting into his little silver Corsa.

'It's a bigger connection,' he says. 'Makes it nice and far-reaching. You know a lot of places make Arthurian claims though, so you've got to present it with a pinch of salt.'

'Oh, the whole thing's as salty as the sea,' I say. It's hot in the car. I can already feel my armpits sweating.

'The script wasn't cohesive. It was nonsense. I can't believe you sent it to me,' says someone in the back, scaring the shit out of me. I turn around and look at her.

‘Catrin!’ I say. I try to sound surprised, but cool and collected. It’s a hard one to pull off. ‘I...did not know you were coming along.’

‘Well, I thought if you wanted my involvement, I may as well come and actually be a part of it. Thanks for messaging me the script. It was crap.’ She looks up from her phone, which she’s been fiddling, and smiles. She is sexy, but she is...scary.

‘So,’ I say, trying to keep my voice smooth, ‘what didn’t you like about it?’

‘It makes no sense. You launch straight into it-’

‘It’s pow, it’s in the moment, it makes sense to go straight to the point.’

‘That’s fair enough,’ she says, ‘and, by the way, thanks for interrupting me. But then, having thrown your audience right into it, you just dump the information on them. That’s horrible. And as a voiceover. It’s like a slideshow.’

‘People are going to be moving about in shot, then interviewed,’ says Richard, feebly jumping to my aid as he drives around the one-way system. Round the castle, up past the one nightclub...

‘Yeah,’ she says, ‘but the whole thing reeks of being half-arsed. Come on, boys, let’s make something happen.’

‘What do you suggest then?’ I ask.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘start with a more active interview with your old guys-’

‘One of them is my Great-Granddad,’ I say. It sounds odd to jump out at her for that, but I don’t really think of him as being an old guy. I suppose we all get a bit precious about our family.

‘Danny,’ says Richard, sternly, but Catrin gets in before him.

‘Dude,’ she says, ‘you have got to not interrupt me. Especially when I’m trying to help you with this.’

‘Wow,’ I say, and almost say something stupid before managing to stop myself. ‘OK.’

‘Good call not saying what you wanted to there,’ she said. I looked around. She was smiling.

‘You didn’t know what I wasn’t going to say.’

‘Your pause, and the way you said “wow”, spoke volumes. By the way, your film is, except for whatever I’m doing in it, all men. It’s a sausage-fest.’

‘It’s a film about a man,’ says Richard, again feebly, as he pulls into a rare parking space near the York. The engine dies down.

‘Didn’t you put in the message that your mum saw something weird happen down there at the cliffs?’ asks Catrin.

‘No,’ I say, ‘my Grandma, with her friend Helen. Helen was a UFO-spotter at the time.’

‘Helen sounds awesome,’ she says.

‘Awesome, but dead from cancer,’ I say. Oh shit. I look at Richard, thinking about his mum. He’s pretending to look for something down by the pedals. Could say sorry? Nah, he’ll just have to get used to it. If we’re going to be open and talk about cancer more, then he’ll put up with it. And besides, he pretended not to hear me, so it’s probably fine.

I notice no-one’s talking now, though. ‘I’ll just go knock then.’

‘That was so not cool,’ says Catrin, who’s returned to looking at her phone.

Thankfully, Catrin isn’t so mean to Great-Granddad and Gareth. In fact, she’s positively polite to them. The few times I can bring myself to turn around and look back at them all squashed into the back of the car, she seems to have put her phone away. Great-Granddad is eagerly telling her about our family, apparently stretching back to some bloke called Niall who started it. Or at least, his version of the book is the oldest surviving version.

‘I remember Niall well,’ says Gareth, mistily. Of course you do.

‘Surely you can’t have been around when he was?’ asks Catrin. She’s got to be sucking up to him because he’s old. Maybe she has a thing for old farts. Would explain why I got such a cool reaction.

‘Gareth’s very old,’ I say, and instantly regret it. I can’t help coming off as snide. I’m just being me. Catrin harrumphs. What’s it going to take to get this girl to warm up to me? She doesn’t like smooth confident Danny and she doesn’t like witty put-down Danny. There’s only so many Dannies I can be.

‘I am,’ says Gareth. He sounds delighted. Maybe it’s like that when you get to a certain age. Must be. It’s why old people’s homes are full of people boasting about the length of their wills and size of their colostomy bags.

‘Older than me,’ says Great-Granddad.

‘If you don’t mind me saying,’ says Catrin, ‘you must have been around a while, what with being a Great-Granddad. Have you always lived in Pembrokeshire?’ This shouldn’t go on too long. We’re pulling up narrower roads now. The air is ripe with the smell of muck and the road signs are starting to display warnings for explosive debris. My memories of childhood walks are tempered with gunshots from the Castlemartin firing range.

‘Since I was born,’ he says. ‘I grew up in Pembroke, though my mum was from the Dock.’

‘I never knew that,’ I say. Shudder. My family are Dock stock? How grim. The Dock just makes me think of the zombies shuffling round Lidl and teenage girls smoking fifty a day. ‘I thought you only worked down there.’

‘Oh yes,’ he says, ‘I worked there. All private business, of course – the navy stopped bothering altogether after the war. Naval shipbuilding ended there before even I was old enough to get a look in, but we were doing repairs and re-fits in the old yards throughout it. But my mother came from the town itself. She took over the shop in Pembroke, got my dad to do it too. That was just before the war...’

We pulled into the car park. 'But you were working on the docks? During the war?' asked Richard.

Great-Granddad nods, and there's a tiny glint of something that drifts quickly through his right eye. Something like...shame? Guilt? 'It was one of those jobs that kept you exempt from soldiering. Like being a policeman or a fireman. Things to do back home.'

At the risk of a dirty look from Catrin, I ask Gareth a question. 'What did you do during the war, Gareth?' I'm not one of those nationalists who thinks everyone should sign up to do something for their country, but I'd still take a dim view of someone not doing anything at all.

'Prayed, mostly,' he says.

'With good reason,' says Great-Granddad. 'The bombing, the hellfire of it, started early in the war.' I wind down the window. Somewhere distant, a gull shrieks. 'The Luftwaffe dropped bombs into the Haven, which didn't kill anything other than a few fish. But it got worse.'

'It's funny,' says Catrin, 'it feels like we're always told that we grew up in an area with so much history. But we're the ones who have to go looking for it.'

'I think that's half the fun,' says Gareth. 'Not bombs and lines of people in exile, I mean – that's horrid. But we can learn lessons from history, and even more lessons from the hidden places in it. Within those gaps – that's the detective part of the story. That's where you work for the story, and whether it really happened or not.'

All this guff would sound great on camera. When I ask him questions during the actual filming, he'll probably just waffle on about counting the steps down to the chapel. 'Shall we get out?' I say. Maybe we can hold onto this conversational magic a bit longer.

Nope, we can't. Catrin has already taken the piss out of my human autocue technique ('for fuck's sake, if you hold up the script it'll flap in the wind') and has insisted on engaging with some walkers, asking them about what they're doing there too.

I huff loudly enough for her to hear, but not so loud that I can't say it was just a sigh and she shouldn't be so uppity. The one of the walkers she's currently talking to is a little skinny bloke in a burgundy leather jacket. Looks about our age. 'I make films too, actually,' he says, tugging at his lapels either out of pride or because the wind's picked up.

'Really?' asks Catrin. 'There's a little hidden film industry going on in Pembrokeshire, apparently.'

'Hidden like the history,' says Richard, looking up from the script he's going through with Gareth and Great-Granddad.

'Exactly!' she says. 'Even stuff like the chapel down there is hidden.' She points to the stairway, but her new friends don't seem bowled over. Must be locals.

'Marvellous though, isn't it?' says leather-skinny-burgundy man.

'Isn't there a story about a hidden bell or something?' says the other walker, a broader guy in a grey hoodie.

'Ah, well, that's the interesting bit-'

'Sorry, Catrin,' I say, 'can we have a bit of quiet? I think we're about ready to go?'

'Hahahaha,' says Catrin. She doesn't laugh – she just says that noise. Sarcasm, it really grates on me. 'Nice talking to you guys.'

'Very nice talking to you too,' says grey hoodie guy, shyly. Ugh.

'We're walking to the St Govan's Inn,' says the skinny guy, 'if you guys finish up here, it would be nice to chat some more with a pint.'

‘We might just do that,’ says Catrin. I cough loudly.

‘Well. We’d best be off then. Come along, Smith.’ The little guy gives us an old-fashioned nod and marches off up the path. The other one sort of shouts his goodbye as he races to catch up.

‘Just, ah, wait for the light,’ I say. Quite keen to go up St Govan’s Inn myself, now. They do a very nice seawater ale, which of course doesn’t have actual seawater in as that would be horrible.

‘So in fact you aren’t ready to start filming and don’t need quiet on the set?’ Catrin folds her arms.

‘Well, I was ready, then you were talking and then there was a cloud and then the light went!’ I throw my hands up in exasperation. Oh. That wasn’t as charming as I’d hoped.

‘Daniel Farley!’ Great-Granddad almost roars it. He takes a deep breath. More gently, he goes on. ‘You mustn’t be rude like that. Catrin here is helping you when she could be anywhere else. She’s brought a lot to this project talking it through with Gareth and I in the car. In fact-’ He looks around. ‘Where is Gareth?’

Shitting hell! The old git’s only gone and wandered off.

‘Well,’ I say, ‘I’m sure he’ll turn up. Why don’t we just get this shot of Great-Granddad in now, so it’s in the can-’ I can see Richard giving me that side-eye. ‘What?’

‘Various.’ He folds his arms. ‘But for one thing, you are now rushing. It’s OK. We have all day. Really, we have all summer.’

‘We should find Gareth,’ says Catrin. ‘It’s dangerous here. You could easily absent-mindedly wander off a cliff and crack your head open.’

‘Fine,’ I say, making sure to make myself sound a bit testy but not enough for it to be brought up, ‘let’s look for him.’

‘Gareth?!’ bellows Great-Granddad against the wind. He has a fine pair of lungs on him for his age. Then again, he’s remarkable for his age generally. Even his todger probably still works fine.

I put my camera back in its bag. ‘Shouldn’t you have a tripod?’ asks Catrin. For any other girl, I’d supply sort of knob gag there, but I’m starting to see the futility of that approach with her. In fact, if she wasn’t Richard’s cousin, I’d have given her the boot off this project yesterday.

‘I prefer a natural technique,’ I say. ‘Have you ever seen *The Shield*?’

‘Danny, you have to let it go,’ says Richard, folding up the script notes, ‘nobody has seen *The Shield*. Even I think you made it up.’

I can see Great-Granddad tearing off down the steps to the chapel. ‘Oi, wait for us,’ I say, picking up the little camera bag. As I march down behind him, I can hear him counting the steps under his breath. It’s not the easiest flight of steps to go down at a speed – so much of it is different shapes and sizes. The inconsistency makes every other movement seem like it’s going to trip me. There’s a sound of seagulls crying.

‘Hang on,’ I say when we reach the bottom, ‘the steps go right into the chapel. Do the ones inside count when you’re counting them too?’

‘Well, it’s a matter of interpretation,’ says Great-Granddad. He barely sounds out of breath. ‘I like to. You may not.’

‘The whole myth of counting the steps, then, is wildly inconsistent,’ I say. ‘There. I’ve disproved centuries of magical mumbo-jumbo.’

Inside the chapel, we find Gareth lighting a candle. ‘Someone left this down here,’ he says.

The room, and the chapel is just one room, feels weirdly insulated, as ever. You can see the joins at the bottoms of the walls where it’s been re-modelled. We pride ourselves on its history, but it’s been fixed up and remade. The drainage will have been fixed up. There’s some fairly modern piping coming out of the other side,

I'm sure. Plumbing wasn't that advanced when Govan was down here preaching. Of that I'm quite certain.

The light, stained green from the wet rock and mossy cliffs, comes in through the open arch to the left. Through there is a cleft in the rock. I know the story. I know that's where Govan hid. I know that there are marks in the rock supposedly made by his ribs when God or some angels or whatever holy force the early Celtic Christians believed in closed the rock around him.

For this moment, I'm enchanted and horrified. Imagine that – for your own safety, being crushed into a cliff-face, all hard and damp. Pressed into a gap in the universe so tight that your ribs make an indentation.

'And it all ends so horribly,' says Gareth. 'Horribly.'

'What, the story?' I say. I've decided not to even question him when it seems like he's responding to something I've thought, rather than said. There's a rational explanation. That's just it, isn't it? He saw where I was looking and deduced what I was thinking. Far-fetched but what else could it be? Sherlock Holmes – eliminate the impossible, embrace the improbable.

'Yes,' he says. 'All for nothing now. The cracks, once opened, crumble over time. Eventually none of it matters.' He puts the little candle on a stony shelf next to some graffiti. I can't make out what it says. The flame dances in a little wind that must be coming through the wall. The chapel's got to be full of tiny pinpricks from being this near the sea.

'Mum took me to a Christmas service last year,' I say. 'In St Mary's.'

'I always liked the Westgate Chapel,' says Gareth. 'Though I do try to go to all of them.'

'I've not been in years,' says Great-Granddad.

'No-one really turned up,' I say. 'I mean, I'm not...I'm an atheist. It didn't bother me. But it was weird. I remember back in school we'd go and sing carols in church.'

‘Which church?’ asks Great-Granddad.

‘I can’t remember. But it was always full. Full of people, full of songs. I’m just trying to work out if I just thought that, if my memory is cheating me, or if even at Christmas services are empty.’

‘I suspect it’s probably both,’ says Gareth.

‘Yes,’ I say, and feel peaceful. It sounds like an odd thing to take note of, but just for a moment I’m not thinking about anything. No plans, no schemes, no half-hearted film projects and even the ability to admit they’re half-hearted. None of it is there.

‘Sorry to wander off,’ says Gareth.

‘Never mind,’ I say.

He doesn’t reply. Instead, he edges past me and ambles through the arch, getting into the cleft in the rock. This is outside the chapel, back into nature, as it were. A faint drizzle of sea mist permeates it. I hear his shoes, totally unsuitable canvas trainers, sloshing in the puddle that always forms. How many times have I been here? I remember Great-Granddad bringing me down and telling me the stories. I remember Grandma telling him off because I shouldn’t hear about such horrible things happening to children. I remember that, not far from here, there’s a little beach in what is really just another fissure in the cliffs.

I remember seeing Keith Richards on the cliff. Or someone did, in a parcel of memory that isn’t my own. I’m borrowing it, and this makes perfect sense right now the way things do in dreams. It’s so vivid, as if I was really there...but no. I know it’s a story in my head. Made up of other people’s stories. Grandma says she met Keith Richards on the cliff and he saved her life. So I’m not remembering it, I’m just remembering the story.

There we are. Rationalised. Sanity restored. Phew.

‘Bit cramped,’ calls Gareth. ‘Too much ale, and too many pies.’ He sloshed out of the cleft again. ‘Still, a good pint of ale is worth four good cups of tea.’

‘And about eight average lagers,’ I say, laughing along. I really am laughing along, too. Blimey.

‘Found him then?’ Richard looks around the door.

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘he was down here...actually, what were you doing down here?’

‘Lighting a candle,’ says Gareth. ‘I like to whenever I come down. My knees aren’t so good and I don’t manage the journey very often. It’s why the chapel in the garden turned up in Pembroke – so I could stay in the town and have the chapel.’

‘It turned up?’ I ask.

‘It’s a funny expression,’ says Great-Granddad, patting Gareth on the back. ‘I mean, everything just sort of turns up, doesn’t it?’

Well, no. We have science and rationality and empiricism to explain everything. I think this, but I don’t say it. Don’t want to shatter Great-Granddad’s old, old mannish-ness. I think this, and I feel more myself. I turn around and look at Catrin’s bum as she leans out the other doorway.

‘Where do you think the bell rock is?’ she says.

‘Nobody really knows,’ says Richard. ‘It’s not something everyone’s agreed on. It’s apparently shaped like a bell.’

I try to think of something smart, but they’ve already gone outside. Come to think of it, I don’t think I could identify the bell rock. We’re constantly told about it, but none of the rocks are actually really shaped like bells. They say that if you throw a rock off it, it’ll bounce off with the clang of a bell. That’s how you know – by testing all of them. Starting, I suppose, with the most bell-shaped one you can find.

‘It wouldn’t be very well disguised if it were shaped like a bell, even a little bit,’ says Gareth.

I try to give him a hard stare, but he’s talking to Great-Granddad. This mind-reading stuff is creepy. But rationally, I know I’ve just caught a bit of a conversation

about something I happened to be thinking about. That's thinking about it scientifically and that's the only way, right?

'I've just always assumed it would be,' says Great-Granddad. 'And I've known about it for my whole life.'

'You're never too old to learn something new,' says Gareth. 'Come on, I know you've been out looking for it. I remember when you were a little boy, scrabbling over the rocks out there, beating a stone on each big one and listening. Your face scrunched up, one hand against the sea breeze. One time your father – no, your Uncle Joe – started panicking that the tide was coming in and tried to come and get you.'

Odd to mistake Great-Granddad's Uncle Joe for his father, I think. Gareth gives me an odd sideways glance.

'Even with his bad leg,' says Great-Granddad. 'Hang on. I don't remember you being there.'

'I came into your shop when you were putting up a Rolling Stones poster,' says Gareth, 'and you didn't know me then either. That's OK.'

'I remember that, though,' says Great-Granddad, 'I think. It was so long ago.'

I leave them to it and go out to the rocks. Whoosh. Caw, caw. I know Great-Granddad is old, I keep saying it to myself. But when he and Gareth are together, talking like that, it's sort of sad. The time they've shared stops being a gift and starts turning bad with its sadness. I wonder, if you lived for a thousand years, would you remember every day? I can't remember what I had for breakfast yesterday.

Catrin seems to have disappeared which is nice, really. Her apparent dislike of me coupled with her sexiness is very confusing. Still, not something to get stuck on. Every narrative is full of could-have-beens and it's never the ones who don't actually enjoy the main character's company. Must remember that.

Richard, on the other hand, is throwing pebbles out over the larger rocks. Keeping an eye on him, I carefully slide down to a little stone structure that at one

point must have been part of the well. Apparently people used to come here to get healed, though it's long run dry. Bizarre really – it's right next to the sea. Still, it's not my place to know how these things work. Holy well water is apparently separate from seawater.

I climb over the rocks, like Great-Granddad apparently did as a little boy. According to Gareth. What was he doing there, then? How did he know? He must be getting his own memories jumbled up with someone else's. I felt the same thing happening earlier today, when I was remembering Grandma's story about meeting Keith Richards. Stones roll down a gap between two boulders as I swing my legs over. Into the cracks.

'Hey! Richie!' I shout. His mum calls him Richie, and it's embarrassed him no end for years. I've been saving it until he thought I'd forgotten.

'Fuck off!' he says, thankfully laughing.

'What are you doing?' I climb over a particularly large, sloping rock to stand with him. Glad I wore the more sensible boots today.

'I'm waiting to hear the clang of a bell.' He looks around for a pebble, picks one up, and throws it at a slightly dome-shaped rock. It makes a satisfying 'ka-klak' noise, but no bell sound. He squints at the horizon. 'D'you think it's further out? Like, almost in the sea?'

'What would be the point in that?' I ask. 'I mean, he'd have wanted it close to the chapel so he could bong it. Without regular bonging, he'd lose his congregation.'

'I dunno about that,' says Richard, 'they didn't have Netflix or Xboxes or Sky Plus back then. Not a lot to occupy their time. Going to church was probably the highlight of their week.'

'Well, even if there was a bell encased in stone by angels, there's every chance that the geography has changed. Maybe it's in the sea. Like sunken treasure.' I point up at where the cliff juts out to a point. A sort of rocky square sits up there, oddly balanced. 'Maybe that's it. Maybe it's more like an island.'

Richard bounced a stone off another rock, further out. 'You could be right. About the changing geography, I mean.'

'It's like memories,' I say, 'the world gets changed by time and it gets confusing where things are left behind. Even the chapel has clearly been done up at some point in relatively recent history. Less than primitive plumbing, you know?'

'You're in a very philosophical mood, Danny.' He throws another stone. Ka-klak.

'Well, it's a wild and bizarre place.' I smile. 'Which is why we're down here. To capture it in an expressionist, interesting...hang on, weren't we making a fucking film?'

Setting up in the chapel and trying to get the light right is a pain. I've cleared everyone except for Richard out. 'I read,' says Richard, 'that actually, some say the rock behind here is the bell rock.'

I rustle the script pages, the sound quite satisfying in the echo chamber of the chapel. 'What? Where the cleft in the rock is?'

'Yeah,' he says. 'It was in a book about Welsh saints in the library.'

'There isn't a library in Pembroke,' I say.

'There is, next to the tourist information centre. But it's a tiddler,' said Richard, 'which is why I was in Carmarthen yesterday, at the bigger library there. While you were on your jolly with your Great-Granddad and the old guy.' He frowns. 'Don't you read your texts?'

'Yes,' I say, a little defensive. 'I just thought you'd gone shopping.' Carmarthen is the nearest civilised town to Pembroke. They actually have a cinema. And a Topman.

'I was researching to add to your script,' he says. 'We're a team, remember?'

I smile. It comes very naturally. 'Sorry, man. I know I've been a bit off while we're here. It's just...it's hard balancing what I want to do. It feels like everything is coming to a head. I want to make a final defining statement on my life here. But...it's hard work.'

'You and your bloody last hurrahs. Over here?' He stands by the window. I point the little DV cam at him and wait for it to focus. Old tech now. Archaic, in fact. The little screen warms in the light. The sun has come out.

'My last hurrahs help me compartmentalise it all,' I say. I make a mental note to go no further. I love Richard, I do, but I don't really want to give myself away. Not on how I operate.

'You know, I don't believe you really do that,' he says, stepping out of the square of light.

'Do what?'

'You know, your whole "grr, I'm sociopathic, I don't care if you don't make enough of a case for it" stuff. I think that's some masculine bullshit you're allowed to move past.' He sounds a bit hoarse at the end of that sentence from talking too fast.

'Maybe...' Shit, I think he's right. 'Maybe you have a point.'

'I mean, I'm just saying,' he says, using that wonderful much-abused phrase invented for saying things people don't want to hear. Just sayin'. 'You know. You don't have to be that way, when things get difficult. I know you're worried about moving on. You have a lot of family down here.'

'My family's one of the oldest here,' I say, even though he knows that. 'I mean, I want to leave this all behind. I know there's a bigger world out there and now I've seen it, at uni, I know I don't want to be back here.'

'I think you take your home with you,' says Richard. 'All the stories you go back to when you date someone new. All the happy things you think of when things are fucking miserable. The places you go with your friends-'

‘Dancing up the rugby club at some party,’ I say, nodding. ‘Or scrabbling through caves at the Little Beach.’

‘Remember when we found that old Rolling Stones poster at your Grandma’s?’ asks Richard.

We’d been eleven or twelve. This fantastic picture of the castle we’d grown up in the shadow of, next to a huge dragon with obscene lips. Great slurping tongue. Before that, I’d just thought all my family’s music they listened to was naff. But this stuck it on a myth. A rearing dragon. ‘We got her to put that record on. *Goats Head Soup*.’

‘Ah man,’ says Richard, ‘I still love that album.’

‘That song, “Winter”,’ I say, ‘that’s a real cracker. And “Angie”, of course.’

‘How could we not mention “Angie”?’ says Richard. ‘But look, mate, what I’m saying is...we’ve got so much here. Don’t feel like you have to throw that away. I know you’ve got your fixation on pub-men, but you won’t be one. Not unless you warp yourself into it out of resentment at Pembrokeshire. Which this wacky place has never, ever asked for by the way.’

I raise my eyebrows. ‘What about when you got beaten up cutting through the Green on the way back from school?’

He shrugs. ‘Arseholes everywhere, not just here. Here is just everywhere, yeah, but it’s also home. And you’re stuck with it wherever you go.’

He’s right, of course. I lock the camera into the tripod. Richard, like Mum, like Grandma, like Great-Granddad, keeps my feet on the ground. Even when weirdoes like that Gareth come breezing into it with their mind-reading and immortality-

‘Where’s Gareth?’ I ask, joining Richard at the window.

‘He’s...’ Richard squints, staring into the horizon. ‘Standing right in the line of a sunbeam. Man, that would be a hell of a shot to end the film on. See?’

I can see. The old man's shape is thin in the light. His beer gut has been absorbed by the yellowing of the sky. I put my hand on the stone wall of the old building. That one shot of him that I could never get on camera, looking for all intents and purposes as at one with the tiny bay as anyone ever could be. I'm not even sure writing it in a book would work, but one day I think I might try. When my turn comes to take up the history of this place in the name of my family and all the things we've lived through. The big ones and the small ones. Birthday parties and wars.

There's a tingle, vibrations through my fingertips. I want to ask Richard if he can feel it too, but first I want to work it out. The buzz reaches my skull, bouncing around my ears. Becomes melodic. Old music and new music from wedding days and cancelled concerts.

A seagull on the wind. The crackle of needle on vinyl. And a bell ringing somewhere, disjointedly tuneful, like a jazz chord or a weird phrase. Like 'Little England'. Like rock and silver. Uncanny, in an unfinished way. Like a myth.

Critical Commentary

Introduction

The Stone Bell seeks to develop its plot and characters by utilising time jumps or ‘temporal ellipses’ within its structure, as well as exploring the use of one location changing with these temporal ellipses. The term ‘ellipsis’ can be found in Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, indicating a gap in time in the structure of a work of fiction; I have opted to use the term ‘temporal ellipses’ within this critical commentary to more clearly indicate the wider, larger gaps within my novel.

This commentary will explore the uses and ramifications of temporality within *The Stone Bell*, with references to the works of other authors and techniques, discussing the creative decisions made and the reasoning behind them. A particular emphasis will be made on the concept of ‘place’ within the novel, as that was one of the driving factors for writing it – to explore, through changing voices in the first person narrative, the ‘local identity’ of Pembrokeshire, with a particular emphasis on the town of Pembroke and the mythology of the nearby chapel of St Govan, a surviving monument to early Celtic Christianity.

Bringing the mythological into the novel was partially important as it was felt during the initial stages of writing that establishing a supernatural character in Govan would emphasise the notion of ‘every day myths’ – or, as Adrian May writes in *Myth and Creative Writing: The Self-Fulfilling Song*, ‘things in our lives become legendary. We all know someone who we like to tell stories about, because they say something to us about what we need from the world...[myths] can help us in the urge to be objective without losing the subjective, circular without losing linearity, rooted without being against progress, connected but still able to act personally, and inclusive without being left adrift in a sea of relativism’¹. In giving the novel a supernatural prop in the form of Govan, who interferes in the lives of its protagonists, a state of ‘everyday life becoming legendary’ was intended to be

¹ Adrian May, *Myth and Creative Writing: The Self-Fulfilling Song* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2011), p.2

invoked – particularly with regards to the ongoing project throughout the novel by various family members to re-tell the story of Govan in more personalised contexts.

The reasons for choosing Pembroke were personal – having grown up in the area and thus having lived there for the better part of two decades, I felt that it was an under-represented location for works of fiction. When Pembrokeshire as a county does appear in novels, it is either as the far more rural and identifiably Welsh half of the county (north Pembrokeshire) or in works of historical fiction relating to the town of Pembroke's connection to the Tudors (King Henry VII having been born in Pembroke Castle).

The Pembroke that I had lived in – one shaped by the twentieth century – seemed relatively unexplored in fiction. In a different medium, director Hattie Dalton's 2010 film *Third Star* used the county as a location, being primarily set in Barafundle Bay, but even then the local geography is altered to the convenience of the plot, rendering it inaccurate – for example, at one point, a ferry is taken by the characters, despite the fact that the locations they are traversing between are a short walk from each other.

With this in mind, from the outset I decided to keep the geography of the town and county in general as accurate as possible, emphasising the sense of 'place' while retaining strong character voices and engaging. History balances itself on its mythology, especially in small Welsh towns, and this led me to engage with the genre of magical realism to tell a story of family and memory through a slightly mystical filter. Returning to May, an invaluable resource when reflecting on my work and values as a writer, 'when we talk about myth, we are talking about what we have in common, about shared feelings, as well as experiences. Religion, art, psychology, and stories, symbols and metaphors all move from the individual to the communal' (page 48). In attempting to tie the history of Pembroke together with a mythical character, and its protagonists' association with that character, *The Stone Bell* seeks to emphasise Pembroke as a space occupied by a variety of voices that diversifies with the continual progression of the twentieth century, with each narrator associated with that communal space.

The Welsh historian Roger Turvey writes that ‘Pembrokeshire’s cultural diversity defies simple definition, being much more of a complex subject than might be the case in the other counties of Wales, with the exception of those areas that border England.’² The area has often been called ‘Little England beyond Wales’, in reference to the majority of the population being largely composed of English speakers, rather than those adopting Welsh as a first language – despite the area being one of the furthest removed from England. To reinforce how far removed from England the country is, I would also draw your attention to the old Welsh name for the area, Pen-brog (now Penfro), which means ‘land’s end’³ – it literally exists at the very end of the country. Pembrokeshire has its histories and myths and to write a novel that didn’t exploit these and explore them in an interpretative and perhaps contradictory way in the nature of fiction would feel like a missed opportunity.

Connecting the human settlement of Pembroke with the more ancient coastal part – as represented in the text by St Govan’s chapel – was important in building this; that the place was a unique property worthy of being written about for its own sake, rather than as a generic Welsh town close to the sea. Often, the coastal isolation is seen as blissful in works like *Third Star* or Carole Matthews’ novel *A Cottage By The Sea* (which is set in North Pembrokeshire, as opposed to *The Stone Bell*’s South Pembrokeshire setting) – but these achieve that by using protagonists who are visitors, seeing the county from the outside. *The Stone Bell* is written with a strong emphasis on the voices of ‘local’ characters, and how their lives are affected by their small-town upbringing and close proximity to the mysticism preserved by the isolation of the area.

This emphasis on the characters and their internal thoughts and feelings led me to plan out the novel to be written in the first person, and from here the decision was made to take advantage of temporal ellipses, with each ellipsis between each of the four sections of the novel getting wider with each subsequent ellipsis. This would allow *The Stone Bell* to be set in several different time periods (more exactly, in the

² Roger Turvey, *Pembrokeshire: The Concise History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p.140

³ See Dillwyn Miles, *Portrait of Pembrokeshire* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1984), p.174

interests of the word count, four different time periods) and allow for characters to develop across generations as their surroundings change.

The best way to retain a ‘fixed point’ for the novel’s loose plot to continue returning to was to follow a family and its dramas throughout the century or so. A strong influence here was the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, which follows the Buendia family’s history across roughly a century (in spite of the text’s title, the amount of time that passes in the story is somewhat ambiguous) in the town of Macondo. Márquez does not include long temporal ellipses in his work, however, and it is such divergences as these that I will be drawing on when comparing *The Stone Bell* to the works of other authors within this commentary.

The splits in the over-arching narrative were inspired by several novels by other authors, though in particular *Hearts In Atlantis* by Stephen King, *The Bone Clocks* by David Mitchell (among other books by the same author), and *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich. Each of these books also used the technique of making each separate section almost self-contained – allowing each part to be read as a short story in its own right, though more rewarding to the reader when read in completion. *The Stone Bell* is written with a view to replicating this effect.

Throughout this critical commentary, each of the four sections of *The Stone Bell* will be discussed in four chapters, with each chapter focusing on a different aspect of the novel with regards to the theme of ‘place’ in the novel and how that is affected by the other factors involved in creating a narrative. According to Jen Webb, ‘No creative writer who is working thoughtfully or imaginatively can fail to consider what matters to them (axiology), what they know and how they can know (epistemology), or the nature of their, their characters’ or their fictional universe’s being (ontology)...explicit consideration and application of these elements will strengthen and enhance both creative and research outputs’⁴. The structuring of these four chapters, in mirroring the four sections of *The Stone Bell*, with each chapter focusing on a different section of the novel and its relation to the ideas

⁴ Jen Webb, *Researching Creative Writing* (Suffolk: Frontinus Limited, 2015), p.54-55

discussed, is intended to create a 'reader's guide', in the interests of ease for referring to the text and avoidance of complication when discussing the work critically.

Each of these chapters will include close reference to other authors (some of whom are mentioned above) to allow for discussion of the diversity of techniques used by different authors and place *The Stone Bell* in a critical context with more clarity.

The first chapter will focus specifically on the concept of 'place', with reference to the research involved in writing *The Stone Bell*. While I have touched on descriptions of the town of Pembroke and the surrounding area in this introduction, the chapter will be a fuller exploration of the research involved and decisions taking in depicting certain areas.

The second chapter will consider the notion of how character is used in conjunction with place and temporality. Character is another distinct theme throughout *The Stone Bell* – the four narrators are written with a distinct voice each time, and the human drama and how it is affected by the location is a prominent factor in determining the narrative.

The third chapter will place the emphasis on temporality (specifically in reference to the narrative technique of temporal ellipses) and place – how a location in the novel can be warped and shifted through the passage of time, and how that can affect the narrative. *The Stone Bell* uses temporal ellipses to drive its plot forward as well as break the novel into four sections to allow for four different studies of Pembroke in four different time periods, and this chapter will allow for some discussion of that in conjunction with the techniques of other authors.

Taking on the theme of temporality from the third chapter, the final chapter will briefly consider more postmodern and philosophical approaches to temporality, in particular with regards to the 'unconscious time' of a novel's subtext and exposition, and reflect on the philosophy of the constructed novel and how that can

be potentially altered and reconfigured – particularly with regard to the episodic nature of *The Stone Bell*.

The conclusion to the critical commentary will of course provide a summary of the arguments presented throughout the chapters as a whole. It is hoped that by presenting each chapter with a focus on a separate section of *The Stone Bell*, it will also create an engaging ‘reader’s guide’ to the novel and the process of writing, editing, and commenting upon it.

Chapter One – Worlds of meaning and experience: Place in *The Stone Bell*

Gillian Tindall writes that ‘in the realm of memory and imagination which is also the realm of dreams and the unconscious, what is crumbling, fading or blurring is not just a place but a part of oneself. The intimate, almost organic relationship that many people have with the buildings they inhabit...has long been implicitly recognised in literary imagery’⁵. While Tindall is writing of houses and buildings, this can be taken to include the wider realm of towns and surroundings, such as the recurring location of the Little Beach in *The Stone Bell*. ‘Place’ underpins the narrative and reflects it, with the locations frequently recurring despite the wider gaps in time relayed by the temporal ellipses utilized within the structure of the novel.

At this point, it might be prudent to underpin the concept of place with a more solid definition. In Tim Cresswell’s *Place: An Introduction*, he offers that place is ‘a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things...We see worlds of meaning and experience...Here “place” is not so much a quality of things in the world as an aspect of the way we choose to think about it – what we decide to emphasize and what we decide to designate as unimportant.’⁶ This view of place fits particularly well with a fictional outlook – that certain emphases on certain elements of a location, as opposed to the dispassionate facts and figures of the place, are important in creating a realistic sense of somewhere.

A perhaps more expanded understanding of this can be extrapolated from Yi-Fu Tuan’s work on the matter:

‘Place can be defined in a variety of ways. Among them is this: place is whatever stable object catches our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of place that looms large momentarily in our view. The pause may be of such short duration and the interest so fleeting that we may

⁵ Gillian Tindall, *Countries of the Mind* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), p.221

⁶ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (second ed.) (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015), p.18

not be fully aware of having focused on any particular object; we believe we have simply been looking at the general scene. Nonetheless these pauses have occurred. It is not possible to look at a scene in general; our eyes keep searching for a landmark, or a feature on the horizon may be so prominent that it compels attention. As we gaze and admire a famous mountain peak on the horizon, it looms so large in our consciousness that the picture we take of it with a camera is likely to disappoint us, revealing a midget where we would expect to find a giant.’⁷

Again, the emphasis is on the building of place by focusing in on smaller details – to refine a sense from being simply the facts and figures of a location and concentrate instead on the smaller images and voices found within that place. It is this approach to place that fits best with my writing regarding *The Stone Bell* – to ‘pause at the points of interest’, and in doing so also guide the reader to the more relevant aspects of the story.

‘Place’ – and particularly capturing it in the emotional, ‘worlds of meaning and experience’ manner that Cresswell uses for definition – was the beginning point for planning *The Stone Bell*, the first decision made in the writing process before even the considerations of structure, temporality, and the use of the first person narrative. I will be exploring the importance of place in several different texts, making brief studies, while discussing my own work and the research involved in writing it.

One critical issue taken into consideration when setting out to write the novel was a lack of accuracy in the depiction of Pembroke in recent works of fiction. For example, when Hattie Dalton’s 2011 film *Third Star* (briefly discussed in the Introduction) presents its depiction of Pembrokeshire, it creates its sense of ‘place’ without accuracy – it builds its ‘world of meaning and experience’ but only to serve its own narrative, with little regard to the actual geography and history of Pembrokeshire. Due to my personal connection to the county, having grown up there, I started writing the novel with the knowledge that the sections set closer to

⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.161

the present day would be based on my own recollections of the town and the coastal area. Of course, the first three sections take place before I knew the place – and therefore a certain amount of research was required. This chapter will concentrate on the initial research in grounding the fictional Pembrokeshire of *The Stone Bell* within the real Pembrokeshire, and how the wider facts and figures of the historical research informed the building of the ‘world of meaning and experience’ described by Cresswell and Tuan.

An initial issue I considered was one of language – that readers expecting a novel set in Wales might wonder why the Welsh language plays so small a part in the depiction of the area. Allowances must be made for any book set in Wales written for an English-speaking readership, but the town of Pembroke is situated in South Pembrokeshire – which has come to be known historically as ‘Little England Beyond Wales’. Historian Roger Turvey explains to a certain degree the ‘anglicized’ corner of Wales that Pembrokeshire had become by the twentieth century (and continues to be, even now):

‘By the beginning of the twentieth century it is possible to divide the country between what may be termed, no doubt controversially, the ‘Welsh’ (native Welsh speakers mainly from the north), ‘Anglo-Welsh’ (native non-Welsh speakers mainly from the south) and the immigrant foreigners (settled mainly, though not exclusively, in the south) who spoke only English. This threefold division of the population makes more difficult the task of defining the Pembrokeshire Welsh, their culture and sense of identity. To say that this complex social division of the population has contributed to a resistance to, or latterly, a decline in the sense of ‘Welshness’ and Welsh identity, particularly, it is argued, as more and more people have turned to using the English language, is to deny the Anglicized south a culture.’⁸

The Stone Bell then sets out to emphasise the culture of that ‘Anglicized south’ that Turvey discusses. An earlier outline for *The Stone Bell* followed more of a conflict within the overall county of Pembrokeshire between the ‘Englishry’ and

⁸ Roger Turvey, *Pembrokeshire – The Concise History* (Tarxien: University of Wales Press 2007), p. 141

‘Welshry’, terms used by historian Brian John to respectively describe the southern and northern parts of Pembrokeshire (“In the south is the Englishry, created by the Normans and still referred to as “Little England beyond Wales”. In the north is the Welshry, a region that has evolved over many centuries of Welsh settlement as a stronghold of Welshness⁹). However, as the first draft of the first section of the novel manifested, the theme seemed over-expository and non-reflective of the real Pembrokeshire. Aside from the differences in language, the Englishry and Welshry have been without conflict and to create it within an already fictional context seemed forced.

As the setting of the book is Pembroke itself, a town situated in the south of Pembrokeshire, *The Stone Bell* was then written in full embrace of the Englishry, acknowledging that even from the early twentieth century Pembroke and the surrounding area was truly ‘Little England beyond Wales’. Throughout the novel, the town and characters become more anglicized and interested in popular culture beyond Wales, culminating in Danny, the protagonist of the final section, beginning his portion of the narrative by returning to Pembroke from Oxford, a keenly English location.

Paralleling the structure of *The Stone Bell* itself, the first chapter of this commentary will concentrate, as noted earlier, on a close reading of the first section of the novel, ‘October 1912 – The Side of the Angels’. As the decision had been made to establish and build the characters of David and his family, the notion of the location does not gain any prominence until page 5, where the family exits the house.

The street name, ‘Eastback’, is mentioned before the town itself is named. This is perhaps indicative of one issue that can be taken with writing from the first person point of view of one protagonist – that exposition, especially from the viewpoint of a convincingly-written teenager, is far more difficult to include. Rather than choosing to have David consider Pembroke and its history as he walks through it, I opted instead to have him casually refer to places as and when he is in or

⁹ Brian John, *Pembrokeshire: Past and Present* (Newport: Greencroft Books 1995), p.153

approaches them. Even the town's name is mentioned off-handedly, to establish that while the place is an important factor in the over-arching plot of the novel, the family and its respective characters will be the central characters.

That is not to say that there is a prominence of people over place in *The Stone Bell*. It is during this sequence, as the Farley family walks to Anna's wedding, that the Mill Pond is first mentioned. The real Mill Pond is an extension of Pembroke Castle's moat, a body of water that doesn't surround the town but stretches around one side of it. It is also a semi-recurring location in the town throughout *The Stone Bell*, with the third section 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again' opening there, along with another visit in the fourth section. The looping path of the Mill Pond, the repetition of the activities typical of walking around it (such as feeding the ducks – as Joe's father does in the 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels') are representative of the looping actions of the characters and their similarities throughout the generations whose stories are told by the over-arching narrative. The gentle recurrence, using the physical architecture of the town, is indicative of another aspect of Yi-Fu Tuan's description of the concept of 'place' and architecture's configuration in it:

'In China...a single roof tile encapsulates the essential order and meaning of the Chinese cosmos. The mythical space depicted there recurs in the house, of which the tile is a part; in the city, of which the house is a part; and finally in the empire, of which the city is a part.

The small mirrors the large. The small is accessible to all human senses. Its messages, being confined within a small area, are readily perceived and understood. Architectural space – a house, a temple, or a city – is a microcosm possessing a lucidity that natural features lack. Architecture continues the line of human effort to heighten awareness by creating a tangible world that articulates experiences, those deeply felt as well as those that can be verbalized, individual as well as collective.' (p.100)

The presence of seabirds along the Mill Pond in this part of the novel is also the first mention of the recurring theme of the crying of gulls and David notes that

‘As if by saying ‘seagull’ my parents had summoned one. I didn’t see it, but it kept cawing and it couldn’t have been any other kind of bird’ (page 6). As a brief example of setting an interconnecting theme earlier in the novel, this sentence establishes the idea of something ever-present but unseen throughout the story – like Gareth’s true identity as Govan, the immortal saint. It also establishes that the town of Pembroke is close to the sea without stating the fact outright, avoiding overly-expository prose.

Joe’s first appearance in *The Stone Bell* has him greeting David from the Mill Pond, where his father is feeding the ducks, and introducing the repeated element that eccentric characters who provide insight to the various protagonists of the book being seen to enjoy feeding the ducks at the Mill Pond. This is intended to be symbolic of the outside influence of these characters in the personal history of the Farley family – that the cycle of history is fed by many different experiences and ultimately bloodlines. This link between eccentric characters and bodies of water was also included to serve to emphasise Gareth’s role in the plot – he is also an eccentric whose appearance constantly interferes with the lives of the mortals around him.

The relationship between the town of Pembroke and the chapel of Saint Govan is represented through this recurring elements in the over-arching plot of water, eccentrics, and friendship. Religious buildings, and chapels in particular, are more prominent in this earlier section of the story as a representation of historical fact that people were more religious in the earlier part of the twentieth century. It also indicates that the family drifts away from their faith the further along the twentieth century they travel, as evidenced by the protagonist of the final section, Danny, who is actively written as a less typically virtuous or even spiritual character than his predecessors.

The Westgate Chapel where Anna Farley marries John Powell is the first religious building to appear ‘physically’ in the text and, like Saint Govan’s Chapel, is overseen by another eccentric, the vicar, Mr Parsons. David’s father suggests at this point that priests are perhaps strange because they have to look at people

differently (page 12) as it's 'part of doing God's work'. This, when taken in the context of Gareth/Govan, can be interpreted to mean that he is stranger because he has been doing God's work – which is left a little vague throughout the novel – for longer than any other priest. Indeed, Mr Parsons' nature as a later 'successor' to Gareth/Govan's eccentricity is written as intentionally strong and includes him being knowledgeable of the mythology of Govan.

Returning to the importance of architecture, the Westgate Chapel can be compared with Saint Govan's chapel in terms of its physicality, as well as its similarly eccentric priests. Both buildings indicate gateways in relation to their location – the Westgate is opposite Pembroke Castle and sits on the very edge of town. The chapel on the cliffs indicates a less official gateway, between the land and the sea, and the importance of the Westgate Chapel earlier in the text is in establishing this idea of gateways. Each temporal ellipsis throughout *The Stone Bell* is another gateway – a non-physical, more literary and overly temporal gateway both for the reader and the characters. On either side of each gateway is a different time and space in which the characters exist with different priorities and responsibilities. It can be acknowledged at this point that this is a feature of many episodic novels, but this chapter will just take a brief look at the reflection between the physical characteristics of the novel's setting and its episodic nature, in keeping with the importance of 'place' and the emphasis on it in this chapter.

This idea of 'gateways', both physically recurring and with time being the hard barrier between each space of the narrative can be considered in conjunction with Wendy B Faris' idea of postmodern storytelling techniques as 'Scheherazade's Children', as defined in her essay 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', where she considers that fiction is 'autogenerative', especially with regards to the concepts of temporality under consideration in *The Stone Bell*, with reference to the narrator of the collection of Middle Eastern folk tales:

'Scheherazade's tales point up to the autogenerative nature of fictions, indeed of language itself, a characteristic made more and more explicit in our post-Joycean age. In Scheherazade's tales, as in *Finnegans Wake*, language

takes on magical properties to light up the nights verging on nightmares in which they are told. This generativity operates at all levels of fiction that I am identifying as Scheherazade's children: on the structural plane with stories that grow out of other stories; on the mimetic front with characters who duplicate themselves in miraculous feats of doubling; in the metaphorical register with images that take on lives of their own and engender others beyond themselves, independent of their referential worlds'¹⁰.

It is the last part of this summary, with the concept of images that take on lives of their own and the mimetic nature of duplicating or semi-duplicating characters, which can be interpreted as including the repetitive nature of the different generations of a family (even one as confused as the Farley family whose bloodline is diluted from the second section of the novel), that is particularly important to consider with regards to *The Stone Bell*. With regards to 'images that take on lives of their own', we are led to the diminishing but recognizably repetitive imagery of the religious building, represented in '1912 – The Side of the Angels' by Westgate Chapel, the tin chapel under construction near the rugby club, and the tales of Saint Govan's chapel told at the wedding reception. The structure of *The Stone Bell* – the solid building, followed by the temporary structure, followed by a changeable myth – is foreshadowed by this early set of structures, all related to the physical though not necessarily physical themselves in nature. This centralizing of the novel's plot around these structures solidifies itself around Anna's wedding at Westgate Chapel – signifying the importance of religious structures throughout the novel, and emphasizing that they will be an important part of the creation of the sense of place in the narrative.

The emphasis on pub culture also begins in '1912 – The Side of the Angels', and it remains a prominent theme throughout the novel, with various pubs either mentioned or appearing in every section. The pub is often used as a focal point for the plot and, in particular, the first section's drama is predominantly focused on

¹⁰ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B Faris ed., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995)

David and Joe's concerns over a minor pub brawl that has taken place before the story begins.

The pub that the brawl takes place in, the Royal Oak, is based on a real pub in Pembroke, also called the Royal Oak. Partially chosen for its historical vagueness (Keith Johnson writes that 'the Royal Oak is a bit of a puzzle, because although it seems to be a well-established inn with a coach arch and stable-yard behind...there are surprisingly few references to it in the records'¹¹), the Royal Oak is also situated very close to the former site of the east gate of town, opposing the west gate where the Westgate Chapel of the earlier half of the story occurs. Its shaded presence throughout the entirety of *The Stone Bell*, being an important part of the first section, briefly visited in the third section 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again', and finally appearing for a full scene in 'June 2012 – Something in the Water', where Danny – a descendant of both David and Joe – sits at the piano and plays through a few popular songs in a half-improvised, ramshackle way.

This is intended to be a reference to Gareth/Govan's role at Anna's wedding, where the first dance between David and Rachel begins the association between the two characters that will lead to their extensive family tree. The circumstances of the two characters meeting, dancing to music that seems off-kilter that Rachel later remembers as jazz. This anachronistic use of jazz (and Rachel notes when later recounting the night that it is anachronistic) in such an unusual setting – a Welsh rugby club in 1912 – is fully intentional, emphasising the magical abilities that Gareth/Govan has acquired through his long life. Gareth/Govan is said in the final section of the novel to sometimes play the piano at the Royal Oak, further emphasising the importance of that particular pub.

The Royal Oak is not the only public drinking space to be given prominence in 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels' – the rugby club is the setting for much the third act of the section and the importance of going out drinking with Joe is a consistent theme throughout for David. The friendship between the two continues a

¹¹ Keith Johnson, *The Pubs of Pembroke, Pembroke Dock, Tenby & South Pembrokeshire* (Glasgow: Logaston Press, 2003), p.47

theme that will run throughout the rest of *The Stone Bell* – each protagonist in each section is concerned with their immediate friendships. Even Danny, the central character of ‘June 2012 – Something in the Water’ and seemingly a more immoral character, has a close friend in Richard (who is written intentionally as echoing the young man with ginger hair fought by David and Joe prior to the novel beginning), and again their friendship is carried out within the confines of pub culture. Here, the recurrence of close male friendships again serves the sense of place in a mythical way – returning to Adrian May’s view that ‘things in our lives become legendary’ and Yi-Fu Tuan’s assertion that ‘mythical space is...a response of feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs. It differs from pragmatic and scientifically conceived spaces in that it ignores the logic of exclusion and contradiction’ (p.99). The pub culture allows these friendships to flourish, and create the mythical space that infiltrates the sense of place throughout *The Stone Bell*. Pubs, like religious buildings, become communal spaces that create the sense of place that crafts the characters.

Returning to Wendy B Faris’ assertion that ‘images...take on lives of their own and engender others beyond themselves, independent of their referential worlds’, the association in communal meeting spaces between churches and pubs is most prominent in this first section of *The Stone Bell*, echoing later in the novel but with less emphasis on the religion of the characters. This is intended as a reflection of the changing fortunes of religion in Wales throughout the twentieth century, particularly in the more immigration-heavy area of Pembrokeshire. The images of churches – from Govan’s ancient chapel by the sea to the ‘temporary’ tin church under construction in the first section (which, in the non-fictional world, is still standing at this time of writing in 2019) – follow the characters, culminating in the final part of the novel featuring a return to the chapel by the cliffs.

Page 27 of *The Stone Bell* features the most emphatic foreshadowing of these future iterations of these images of churches and pubs, where David observes on the way to the rugby club that ‘I stayed out, my eyes still on the church. This one had a graveyard. I wanted to go and read the names on the stones. I’d always enjoyed doing that, especially if I found another Farley. Sounds silly, but it was nice to know there were more of us out there, even in different times.’ In this moment of

contemplation, David is aware that there are more members of his family existing in different time periods and finds comfort in it. He is equating the temporal with the physical, in unintentionally referring to the structure of the novel.

This is indicative again of the 'autogenerative' nature of stories discussed by Wendy B Faris, and is also in keeping with Patricia Drechsel Tobin's assertion that 'elements of a novel, although fixed in temporal relation to each other, change their shape and fluctuate in their significance, because merely chronological succession becomes informed with the operations of cause and effect, and the novelistic character is seen as having assumed a unique destiny that was nevertheless inevitable'¹². The relationship between temporality and place will be explored in more depth in Chapter Three of this commentary, but I would like to note here that the physicality of a place and how it changes is reflected not only in descriptive prose and settings, but also how the voices change throughout a novel, reflecting each different period in time.

As previously noted, the genealogical connections between David's family and place are a strong part of making the place itself important. Just as they affect the location of the story, in their small contributions as members of society and in their personal lives, the location affects them – David, Joe and his father Llewellyn work in a private dockyard in 1912, at that point in time one of the larger industries in the area, though it was reaching a point of decline, as recorded by historian Brian John:

'In the early years of the present century Pembroke Dock was still one of the main industrial centres of West Wales, and during World War I the dockyard worked at full pace, specializing in the building of small, swift cruisers. But its remoteness was beginning to count as a disadvantage, and in the hard inter-war years the Admiralty began to think of it as something of an expendable

¹² Patricia Drechsel Tobin, *Time And The Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* (Guildford: Princeton University press, 1978), p.5

luxury. In 1926 it was abruptly closed, and the town was thrown into despair.’¹³

With the closure of the main naval dockyard, the smaller private dockyards suffered and the main yard was not opened again until 1939 when World War Two broke out. This relates to David and Rachel’s son, Daniel, who is saved from conscription by the grace of his dockyard job (as recounted by his mother – ‘I remember the relief on his face when the letters went out saying the dock workers were to stay here rather than join up, and I remember how happy I was too’, p.85), as the main yard was reopened for the repair of ships (‘The moment that war was declared on 3 September 1939 the old dockyard was opened up once more. This time it did not build ships but was used as a repair and refit yard’¹⁴).

By 1973, the third section of *The Stone Bell* focuses on the Farley family’s far safer choice of business, with Daniel owning Rachel and David’s shop. Here the novel demonstrates that Pembroke is changing into a more homogenous town, with less unique – though economically safer – business opportunities. The visit from the Rolling Stones, a group not known for playing concerts in smaller towns, the section is intended to show how the place has become more accessible to the outside world. Pembroke, always built on immigrants (particularly from Ireland and England), grew into even more open communication with the outside world. The nature of the protagonist in the fourth section, Danny, returning from university for a final summer in his hometown, is intentionally written to show the last member of the family in the novel as returning from the ‘outside world’ and seeing Pembroke from that perspective – as someone who finds no issue with contemplating a future elsewhere, abandoning his roots¹⁵.

The ‘autogenerative’ nature of fiction as defined in Faris’ ‘Schezerade’s Children’ is also worth considering with regards to applying it to the work of other authors (particularly within the genre of magical realism and its application to issues of temporality and place), to briefly discuss such examples. Caradog Prichard’s *One*

¹³ Brian John, *Pembrokeshire: Past and Present* (Newport: Greencroft Books 1995), p.118

¹⁴ Phil Carradice, *The History of Pembroke Dock* (Pembroke Dock: Accent Press, 2006), p.176

¹⁵ This will be discussed further in Chapter Four of this commentary.

Moonlit Night, for example, fully embraces the autogenerative theory, utilising the technique of relaying the whole story as a recollection of its narrator to a mythical 'Queen of the Black Lake'. It can be acknowledged that Prichard's novel is deserving of an entire essay in its own right; however, I will be discussing it very briefly here, in the interest of the word count.

That the unnamed narrator is relating the events of his childhood already creates a framing device that is, as a work of fiction, a story generating another story. But within that, then is ambiguity when it comes to the supernatural events of the story. A great deal of the narrative is given to day-to-day experiences within an early twentieth century Welsh mining village, but it is in these moments of magical realism that the reader understands these 'images that take on lives of their own' as existing in the hidden space between the relation of the story to the Black Queen and the 'true account' that the narrator has lived through. One brief example of these supernatural elements (to be held in contrast with the various incidents throughout the novel involving pignut collecting, beer and boxing matches) is the 'wheel of fire' that the narrator discusses with his friend Huw¹⁶. The two of them discuss that 'there was a Voice in the wheel' that was recorded in local discussion during 'the time of the Revival'.

Another example of an author using this technique would be Peter Ackroyd. In several novels, including *Hawksmoor* and *English Music*, the author uses split narratives and unreliable narrators to tell stories nestled within stories that generate one another. For example, the narrator of *English Music*, the child Timothy Harcombe, relates various dreams where he encounters fictional characters of Victorian literature. In this case the stories generated are Ackroyd's interpretation of pre-existing characters including Alice (from *Alice in Wonderland*) and Sherlock Holmes; yet they are seen from Timothy's perspective and, in that respect, generate new stories again from their origins. For example, Alice, upon falling in mud, declares 'Just look at my lovely white dress...it's ruined. Shit!'¹⁷

¹⁶ Caradog Prichard, *One Moonlit Night* (St Ives: Canongate Books, 2015), p.78

¹⁷ Peter Ackroyd, *English Music* (St Ives: Penguin Books, 1992), p.37

The 'place' that is important in relating and generating these stories out of other stories is Timothy's childhood home, where his father reads such works of fiction to him on a nightly basis. Later in the novel, when he is taken away to live with his grandparents, such instances of vivid dreams filled with his interaction with fictional characters almost cease altogether. In this instance, place is very much connected with character –as the gaps in time between meetings with his father widen, he finds the 'extra' stories within his narrative reducing.

It is important, then, to consider how characters are affected by temporality within a novel, before pursuing further discussion of how temporality affects place. Following this will allow for a broader discussion of both elements of place and character.

Chapter Two – Problems of human life: Character and temporal ellipses in *The Stone Bell*

This chapter of the critical commentary will focus on another important element of *The Stone Bell* and how it is affected by the technique of temporal ellipses, character. While the notion of characters being an important factor in the writing of a novel may seem an obvious discussion point, the four narrators of the novel and their distinct voices provide *The Stone Bell* with a great deal of its important moments and signifiers that the four stories stand together as an episodic novel.

In keeping with the previous chapter, the discussion here will take the form of a close reading of the second section of *The Stone Bell*, 'September 1942 – Damned', along with comparisons with the work of other authors writing similar themes. In choosing a protagonist and narrator for this section, the decision was made to include a character from the first section as a means of easing the reader into the format of different narrators without creating a jarring experience by introducing an entirely new character, as would happen in the next two sections of the novel. Rachel was chosen as the narrator due to her status as the romantic lead of the first section – both David and Joe had been vying for her attention, making her character a significant one. By taking her point of view, the events of the first section and their various outcomes could be assessed in a fresh way, as well as acknowledging Adrian May's 'everyday myth' factor to give the characters more dramatic weight.

David's death, noted at the beginning of the section, was also intended to aid the reader in their 'adjustment' to the fragmented nature of the narrative, as well as reflecting the uncertainty of the Second World War and the passage of time in general. Rachel, as perceived by the teenage David in 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels', was previously shown to be a positive, slightly shy character with a wry sense of humour. In the second section, however, the reader is allowed into her thoughts and sees a far more pessimistic and dissatisfied woman, deeply affected by the tragedy she has been through as well as the effect that tragedy has had on her

actions in the past. One of the most notable of those actions is her infidelity to David, strongly implied throughout and confirmed towards the end of the section.

Rachel's grief largely manifests itself in her nihilistic outlook of the world, following the telegram informing her of David's death and the bombing of Pembroke Dock by the Luftwaffe throughout the early years of the war. One particular incident, described by Rachel as when 'Hell blossomed out of the Dock that early summer night last year', is in direct reference to the historical bombardment of the town on May 12th, 1941, where 'nearly 2,000 houses were damaged, the Pier Hotel, the Three Crowns and the Prince Albert pubs being destroyed by direct hits. Thirty-two people were killed, thirty civilians and two servicemen, while dozens more were injured by flying glass and shrapnel'¹⁸.

War is often used in fiction to create conflict and drama. In Robert Saunders Dowst's *The Technique of Fiction Writing*, plot is defined as 'a problem of human life brought to a fitting and convincing solution, and consists of a series of events which displays the fact and result of a conflict between opposing forces, spiritual and material'¹⁹. The grief caused by war is a problem of human life, perhaps one of the most extreme problems, therefore it was felt that including it at this point in the novel would provide a dramatic element to force the narrative forward, particularly in regards to the progression of character.

The intense trauma of Rachel witnessing the fire-bombing of Pembroke Dock is reflected in the character's speech patterns – she is presented as quite proper for the most part, adhering to rules such as 'no tinned meat during the day', while thinking 'Hell was real and it was here. In fucking Pembroke Dock'. The use of profanity from a character previously seen to be quite innocent emphasises that not only has the character grown older, but the world has grown crueller, and the introspective nature of the first page of 'September 1942 – Damned' are intended to convey this. The profanity is repeated and further emphasised when Rachel realises

¹⁸ Phil Carradice, *The History of Pembroke Dock* (Pembroke Dock: Accent Press, 2006), p.182

¹⁹ Robert Saunders Dowst, *The Technique of Fiction Writing* (Ohio: James Napp Reeve, 1921), p.58

that someone is attempting to come into the shop and considers that she ‘never even used to think about the word fuck, let alone want to throw it at someone’.

The changing language of Pembroke is considered here, too. Rachel notes that Daniel, her son, calls her ‘Mum...not Mam or Ma’ in contrast to the previous section, where David referred to his mother as ‘Mam’ throughout. This is indicative of the growth in communication technologies and travel as the twentieth century edged towards its mid-point, with more widely-available telephones, and better public transport meaning people moved to new locations further away with far greater ease. Pembroke – already a town with many immigrants from England and Ireland – opened up to even more influence from more English-speaking communities with a more anglicised take on the English language²⁰.

The changed language of the characters in the story is therefore used to indicate the passage of time and how that has altered the natural state of each character – Rachel observes that Daniel was changed by mixing with English boys in his school. Deliberate wordplay is invoked with use of the popular Welsh phrase (or rather English language phrase used by Welsh people) ‘now in a minute’ – the phrase comes to Rachel as she contemplates the jolting nature of time in her memory. Her understanding and observations of this are also reflective of the narrative of *The Stone Bell* as a whole, with each section of the novel as the ‘now’ separated by a larger space of time that is rendered insubstantial as a ‘minute’. This could perhaps be considered over-indulgent as the phrase draws close to parody, but I would like to acknowledge here that this was considered during the writing process and it was decided – particularly while redrafting – to keep it, while jettisoning other phrases that might have similarly veered into the realm of parody.

That Rachel goes on from this to suddenly remember the taste of beef sandwiches ‘with too much mustard’, uncertain of why she finds herself thinking about it, is again a reference to the speed of the narrative, referring back to the sandwiches served, and discussed by the characters at some length, at the wedding

²⁰ As referred to in this commentary’s introduction, immigration from England and Ireland into Pembrokeshire had a widespread influence on the language

reception in 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels'. Her question to herself 'Can't I even hold on to the taste of something I've eaten only minutes before?' is also a reference to the temporal structure of *The Stone Bell* – that the narrative moves on with considerable speed.

A factor worth mentioning at this point in this close reading of *The Stone Bell* is the summary of Rachel's story to Daniel – rather than relaying the first section of the novel from her point of view, the text states 'Then I talk about dancing'. Music is used to anchor the importance of Rachel's story to Daniel's life and lineage – if there had been no music at the wedding reception (though this is an unlikely scenario), she and David may never have danced together and their lives – and the narrative of the novel – would have been very different. Both of them, in 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels', indicate that they are poor dancers – that they have little sense of musicality.

The last of the family line to be shown in the narrative, Danny, is perfectly at ease sitting at the piano and playing it several times, and this is intended to represent how the narrative has grown; a family starts with little musical talent and acquires it (possibly through Rachel's infidelity with Joe) generations down the line. This natural musicality is also akin to Gareth/Govan's, and this is intended to position the family as successors to his position in the narrative as an omniscient force that exists outside the narrative.²¹

Joe's re-introduction to the text (page 76) has Rachel describing him as still looking like his seventeen year-old self 'if you look hard enough at him' who also has an 'already-white beard'. Again, a comparison is drawn between how the characters perceive themselves and each other and the structure of *The Stone Bell's* narrative. Joe is both young, as he was when Rachel first met him, and older, damaged by the passage of time and the events 'unseen' in the temporal ellipsis between the first section and the second. Rachel states that 'the last time the world ended' – the text indicating the First World War – it 'made thousands of young men into old men'. The narrative uses its temporal ellipsis to inflict massive amounts of damage on one of

²¹ This will be discussed further in Chapter Four of the commentary.

the central characters in the novel, having pushed David out of the narrative entirely.

It can be argued that putting such drama into the 'missing spaces' of the narrative elevates the quieter moments, such as Rachel's introspective grief, allowing for a greater exploration of those moments. It also puts more of a focus on shock developments within the story to aid the dramatic tension contained within – such as Joe's injury and rapid aging – by surprising the reader.

Rachel's change to a more cynical character is again emphasised in her internal thoughts, and how they contrast with the apparent optimism displayed by Joe and Daniel, in particular with regards to the mythology of St Govan's chapel. While her companions enthuse about counting the steps and how the number of steps changes every time, Rachel states internally, flatly, 'I don't bother counting the steps'. This is intentionally delivered internally with a lack of enthusiasm to contrast with her interest in hearing the stories of the chapel when she first met Joe and Daniel in the earlier section of the novel.

Her grief is also reflected in the local environment and her descriptions of it. The isolation of her grief is recognised in how she perceives the muffled sound of the waves 'crackling like a radio searching for its channel. Desperate for a signal'. What was a place of myth and legend has been, in her grief-stricken state of mind, rendered as somewhere thoroughly lonely in her metaphor of a radio without the focus of any reception.

There is also significant change in the character of Joe between the first and second sections of *The Stone Bell*, with each depiction of each character heavily informed by two different narrators, David and Rachel. The thirty-year gap between the two sections means that there is of course physical change; Joe is described, however, as having a white beard, although he would only be forty-seven years old. Notably, Rachel tells him that it is 'more of a grey' but 'white on a day like this, when it's bright', having initially referred to it as white. This is representative of the affection she holds for him, as well as her sense of isolation thawing. It is also a prompt for Joe's joking comment that 'perhaps age is just a trick of the light' – which

he immediately lives up to by joking casually and attempting to lighten the situation with humour.

The changes in Joe's character in the 'missing space' of thirty years in the narrative are reflected in his actions as well as his appearance, initially more subtly. For example, he is seen smoking a pipe. This is intended to indicate that he has taken over the role of male protagonist from David, who served as the primary character of the first section. Notably, David struggled with pipe-smoking when he attempted it with his father; by contrast, the older version of Joe successfully manages to light his pipe and smoke it. He has carried out David's aspirations, maintaining a presence beyond him in the ongoing narrative of the novel and, as revealed later in the section, is Daniel's father.

This revelation retroactively turns the first section into a trick for the reader that reflects the temporal structure of *The Stone Bell* as a novel concerned with hidden spaces in its episodic narrative. David was introduced as the protagonist in the first section, but it is made explicit by the end of 'September 1942 – Damned' that he is not Daniel's biological father. This, as revealed in the third section 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again' is never revealed to Daniel, though he does suspect his mother and Joe may have shared a romantic attachment later in life.

The secrets of the family and their lineage are forgotten and stripped from the characters like memories left unrecorded. The family line – beginning with David – is rendered already unsound biologically in the very first temporal ellipsis, with his descendants only really his descendants by marriage. The structure of the novel is therefore, if one is to consider the typical structure of a family-based novel as genealogically blood-based, more uncertain. The implication of this is one of dramatic uncertainty; from the earliest divergence, with 'September 1942 – Damned', the reader is intended to be left feeling as though any change could be made to the characters in the missing space between sections.

David's character is explained a little more as Joe, Rachel and Daniel remember him as they sit on the beach; with Joe revealing more stories about David to Daniel about the freedom they felt returning home from the First World War. He

measures the time between the start and end of the war as ‘a fairly short time that felt like a very long time later’, which is intended as both a comment on how the violence of war alters the passage of time and memory and as a reference to the temporal structure of the novel; just as traumatic events can alter one’s perception of time, so the reader’s perception of time within *The Stone Bell* has been warped by the structure of the novel and its use of temporal ellipses.

Another character absent from the second section though still developed within it is Gareth/Govan. The decision was made to deliberately keep him absent here to focus on the other characters’ shared sense of grief and the implications of David’s death, but the legend of St Govan and their discussion concerning it while they visit the chapel on the cliffs is included to emphasise the importance of stories and how the gaps in them can bring people together. Joe tells Daniel about his own father, and how Niall told his stories of St Govan to Joe and David when they returned from the war.

Govan is much discussed in ‘September 1942 – Damned’ to provide further backstory to the mythological character, in full embrace of the contradictory nature of the local mythology, and in keeping with Adrian May’s suggestion that ‘Mythic stories’ ‘suggestfulness’ includes a kind of adaptability to change, even to brutal reworkings, beyond recognition of any original source. So how you do it is open to your most extreme fancy’ (May, p.107). Joe discusses the stories his father told him with Daniel (also reinforcing his own paternal status to Daniel), including the possibility that Govan was Gawain, a knight of King Arthur. A certain amount of creative liberty has been taken here – historian TD Breverton writes that ‘Old legends link the site with Gawain, King Arthur’s nephew, who was killed by Sir Lancelot and buried here’²², and Wendy Hughes also notes this in her guide to the site – ‘others say it is the cell of the Arthurian knight Gawaine of the Round Table, who became a hermit after the death of King Arthur’²³.

²² TD Breverton, *The Book of Welsh Saints* (Cowbridge: Glyndwyr Publishing, 2000), p.276

²³ Wendy Hughes, *The Story of Pembrokeshire* (Pwllheli: Llygad Gwalch, 2010), p.43

There are discrepancies between even these closer ideas of Govan's history, even if one is to ignore the other theories regarding his identity, which *The Stone Bell* deliberately sets out to acknowledge – in the first section of the novel, Joe and David discuss Gareth's accent sounding 'a little bit Irish', which is intended to reflect either the (in some legends) Irish heritage of Gawain or that, as Breverton also writes, Govan was 'the Irish Abbot of Dairinis Monastery, County Wexford...chased here by pirates in the sixth century, and spent the remainder of his life ministering to local people in Dyfed'. In 'September 1942 – Damned', Joe describes pub culture in Pembroke (p.91) as 'A crowd of old men telling you their life stories, even though they don't always make sense. I suppose it is a history, of sorts'. Though he doesn't directly refer to Gareth/Govan, it is intended to imply a comparison between the contradictory nature of mythology and the confused and contradictory nature of 'banter' amongst older patrons of pubs in small Welsh towns.

The Stone Bell's version of Saint Govan is built on these contradictory accounts, with the various versions of the history of the man and his chapel reflected in the narrative gaps provided by the temporal ellipses. The character's long-lived nature allowed for supernatural elements to be introduced that only grow more apparent as the novel moves along – for example, the quick and disjointed music played by Gareth at the wedding reception is considered unusual. By 'September 1942 – Damned', Rachel is able to recognise the style of music as being jazz, despite the earlier section of the novel being set in 1912, several years before jazz music would have been popular enough to have been recognised in rural Wales.

Here, the gap in time is also a gap in popular culture – trends in music change throughout history and those changes reflect the passage of time and the interests of the characters. Music is a recurring theme throughout *The Stone Bell* because of this – it is intended to provide a rich cultural background that is instantly evocative of the novel's temporal settings. David and Rachel dancing together to jazz as Joe watches sets the events of the novel in motion. Notably, in the second section of the novel, the nostalgia for that time and in particular the story of that first dance is how Joe and Rachel process their grief, in continuously telling Daniel about it. The temporal ellipsis is measured in the fading of the music in the first section into the

natural sounds of the cliffs – in particular, the seabirds calling – and culminates in the musical ringing of Saint Govan’s bell.

Rachel’s experience waking to the sound of the bell on the beach is also intended to evoke the repetitive nature of music and in particular popular music that would be a constant accompaniment to characters living through the twentieth century. Seemingly half-asleep, Rachel notes (p.86) ‘The snoring, the waves, the birds...the snoring, the waves, the crying birds...the snoring, the waves, Daniel crying, a bell ringing’. This use of aural repetition to ‘transport’ both Rachel and Joe to a post-sleep state where they both believe Daniel is a crying child again is written with the intention of evoking the nostalgic effect of music by presenting it semi-literally.

Joe advising Rachel to follow him with ‘Good ears, trust me,’ is also intended to reflect the relationship that the central characters in all four sections have with music – it is music that Gareth/Govan uses to tempt them into their various fates, pushing the narrative along gently and ensuring that each piece of music has the potential to act as a nostalgic device for them later. Joe suggests following the ringing sound of the bell and the crying sound and indicates that he has ‘good ears’ – as a character central to the plot of the novel as a whole (as well as the first two sections), his relationship to music and listening for harmony is integral to the development of later characters in *The Stone Bell*. Notably, David had difficulty dancing in rhythm to the music played by Gareth/Govan in the first section of the novel, while Joe and his descendants have a more natural inclination towards music, culminating in Danny (the protagonist of the final section) being unable to pass a piano without playing some tune on it. When Rachel and Joe enter the cave during their dream sequence, among the fears Rachel experiences is the sound of jazz, synonymous with her guilt over her infidelity.

‘September 1942 – Damned’ features an ambiguous dream sequence²⁴ that is also reflective of the temporal structure of the novel. Following Joe and Rachel’s shared dream of exploring a cave that is deeper than they remember it being, they

²⁴ Earlier drafts of *The Stone Bell* featured more of these increasingly surreal dream sequences in the subsequent sections of the novel, but it was felt that in retaining only one it would provide more dramatic impact and this felt the most relevant to the overall narrative.

are woken by Daniel who tells them that they have been asleep for less than ten minutes. Joe believes that they were asleep 'for longer' – he doesn't specify how much longer, but the sequence in the flooding cave is written to indicate a significantly longer time.

This false gap in time – in which two characters come to an open acknowledgement that Joe may be Daniel's father – directly addresses the narrative gap of the temporal ellipsis within the text by showing the experience as a dream sequence within this section of the novel. Because, however, it is a shared dream sequence, it is left ambiguous as to how 'real' it may be, and therefore how it might affect the characters and their experiences. The association between the internal temporal ellipsis in 'September 1942 – Damned' and the previous gap between the two sections of the novel is acknowledged later in the text, when Rachel and Joe return to the back room of Rachel's shop. Her narration indicates that 'We haven't talked about what happened on the beach – either this afternoon or twenty years ago', drawing a deliberate comparison between the first time they entered the cave together – within the temporal ellipsis in the novel's structure – and the second, which occurred in a shared dream that apparently stretched the sensation of time passing to a point at odds with measured time.

Ultimately the importance of this first temporal ellipsis in the novel is emphasised in the conclusion to 'September 1942 – Damned', where Rachel and Joe decide not to tell Daniel that Joe is his father. Joe describes the secret as being 'Like a myth. Weaving into the history of your family.'²⁵ Like the gaps of hidden narrative inherent in each temporal ellipsis in the novel, Joe becomes a hidden presence – always influential in the direction of the novel as it follows the Farley/Lloyd family, but never directly acknowledged. His description of the secret of Daniel's parenthood as being mythical is intended to refer again to the contradictory nature of myths, as discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to Saint Govan, although Joe

²⁵ Notably, in the closing lines of *The Stone Bell*, Danny compares the image of Gareth/Govan standing by the chapel as being 'unfinished...like a myth', echoing Joe's comment earlier in the novel and closing the loop between the secret of Daniel's parentage and Danny's acceptance of his family history.

is quick to offer Rachel an explanation for the more surreal and potentially magical episode they experienced on the beach.

In doing this, he challenges the magical elements of the story by threatening to impose rationality upon them, even going as far as to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, declaring 'Once you eliminate the impossible – which we must – then you are left only with the improbable.' The magical explanation makes more sense to Rachel, who also believes that Joe is imposing rationality on what is clearly a supernatural event, claiming that 'We tell ourselves what the truth must be because the alternative doesn't fit into the world'.

To conclude this chapter, a close reading of the second section of the novel reveals some of the narrative techniques used to emphasise the importance of character in *The Stone Bell* and how it plays into the episodic nature of the novel. Moving on from 'September 1942 – Damned', the hidden space of time in the temporal ellipsis before the next section, 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again' pushes both Joe and Rachel out of the narrative so that they exist only in memory, unable to control the rationality of their personal narrative. When Daniel, now much older, is seen again, he discusses with his daughter the possibility of a romantic connection between Joe and Rachel and therefore also the possibility of a hidden truth within the narrative. On a personal level for the characters, this is the affair that led to the events of *The Stone Bell*; but on a broader level for the novel overall, it is an engagement with hidden aspects of the narrative including the magical realism suppressed by the modern, rational aspects of working class life in Pembroke. This hidden space will be discussed further in Chapter Four of this commentary with regards to the idea of 'unconscious time' within the narrative and touching on research into the notion of 'chronotopes' and the relation of that concept to the episodic nature of *The Stone Bell*. However, before taking on this more philosophical consideration, I would like to move on to Chapter Three to discuss the connections between place and temporality, expanding on the themes of Chapter One and combining them with elements of the discussion featured in this chapter.

Chapter Three – Time is relative: Place, memory and temporal ellipses in *The Stone Bell*

This chapter seeks to further explore the relation between place and temporality, with less emphasis on historical research and more on literary techniques employed in *The Stone Bell* and particularly on similar themes in the work of other authors, emphasizing these influential works here more than my own writing so as to illustrate some of the theoretical ideas behind the construction of *The Stone Bell*. In this section, the work of other authors will be used to compare and contrast with similar techniques used in *The Stone Bell* – in particular, the work of Gabriel García Márquez.

Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* uses place and time in conjunction, and uses a similar time span as *The Stone Bell* to convey its story. Tindall's linking of memory and dreams can be applied to this novel, encompassing the general themes of magical realism and also the passage of time. The appeal of using time in conjunction with place in my own work originated with Márquez's novel, as it reflects the surreal nature of time in dreams – in that magical realism is a literal take on the more metaphorical organic connection between place and memory.

As noted in Rúben Pelayo's *Gabriel García Márquez: A Critical Companion*, 'there are occasional references back to the sixteenth century, as if to suggest the beginning of the colonization of South America'²⁶. Márquez plays with time, bringing real-world history in from the off, despite the magical events the reader is quick to learn of. By the end of the novel, the reader – and the final survivor of the Buendia line, Aureliano – discovers that the gypsy Melquíades had already predicted the history of the family in Macondo, up to the town's final destruction in a storm. The narrative of the novel takes the determinist nature of fiction and gradually makes it more and more visible – until, at the very end of the novel, Melquíades' prophecy

²⁶ Rúben Pelayo, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), p.96

predicting the entire history of the Buendia family is fully translated by Aureliano Babilonia, and the village is destroyed by the storm.

This concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy is detailed in Mark Currie's *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, where he describes it as a 'performative prolepsis' which 'involves an imagined future which produces the present, and a present which, thus produced, produces the future...the most common relation of the present to the future, one which pertains in repetition, automatic perception, and self-narration, in which the future turns out as expected'²⁷. While Currie is describing this creative act in its most literal literary sense – i.e. showing the reader the future before returning to the present – Márquez adds a more postmodern take on it with the use of Melquíades' prophecy.²⁸ However, in starting *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with the Colonel's firing squad and returning to the past, therefore creating the self-fulfilling prophecy within the text, he is also using the more literal technique of the 'performative prolepsis'.

This is an expansion of the designation of 'prolepsis', given by Genette in *Narrative Discourse* in that it creates determinism within the text – the characters, having first been glimpsed in the future, are destined to fulfill their lives to reach that particular point, with the dramatic tension in the story drawing on this.

In spite of the use of magic used in Márquez's writing (although arguably in line with Clarke's third law that states that any sufficiently advanced form of science resembles magic to one not versed in it), this use of determinism is an embrace of popular scientific theory; as noted in Kathleen McNerney's *Understanding Gabriel García Márquez*, 'Einstein's formulation of the theory of relativity led him to the conclusion that time itself is relative and has no absolute sense. Perhaps José Arcadio Segundo, considered mad by everyone, is envisioning the same concept'²⁹.

²⁷ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.44

²⁸ Chapter Four of this commentary will explore such postmodern techniques in more detail.

²⁹ Kathleen McNerney, *Understanding Gabriel García Márquez* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p.25

McNerney is referring to the passage in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where José Arcadio Segundo has locked himself in a room studying Melquíades' scrolls of prophecy (which bear out the plot of the novel itself). The text describes the character as 'at the time the most lucid member of the house', the omnipresent third-person narration laying this out as a fact, as Márquez does throughout the novel. He is described as being 'the only one who had enough lucidity to sense the truth of the fact that time also stumbled and had accidents and could therefore splinter and leave an eternalized fragment in a room' (p.355).

José Arcadio Segundo has recognised that he has found a place outside the boundaries of time and its human notions of linearity. In this, we can interpret that the concept of time within the book is a mirror to the typical linearity and structure of the novel. José Arcadio Segundo, in escaping the laws of the universe he finds himself in, is able to live for an incredibly long time, exiting not only the normal confines of time and space but also the narrative of the book. To briefly make a connection between literature and theoretical physics (a study requiring a longer, less constrained essay), José Arcadio Segundo seems to be representative of what physicist Carlo Rovelli describes as both 'an abstruse mental problem' and 'a burning issue' in modern physics:

'In physics there is no representative of the 'now'. Compare 'now' with 'here'. 'Here' designates the place where a speaker is: for two different people 'here' points to two different places. Consequently 'here' is a word the meaning of which depends on where it is spoken. The technical term for this kind of utterance is 'indexical'. 'Now' also points to the instant in which the word is uttered, and is also classed as 'indexical'. But no-one would dream of saying that things 'here' exist, whereas things which are not 'here' do not exist. So then why do we say that things that are 'now' exist and that everything else doesn't?'³⁰

It should be noted that there is also an argument that while time is fluid to a certain degree, the temporal nature of Márquez's Macondo is still moving forwards

³⁰ Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (St Ives: Penguin Random House UK), p.58

in a determinist direction, reflected in both the use of prophecy within the story and also the literary technique of the 'performative prolepsis'. There are repetitions from generation to generation of the Buendía family, but these are still different events happening to different characters connected by our reading of the text. Time may bend and crack but it still moves in a linear way towards a fixed point, as Regina Janes argues – 'time is linear, the town passes through chronological historical phases that reduce it to the nothingness from which it began, everyone dies (or disappears), and the book ends'³¹.

This recognition of the relativity of time as reflective of the relativity of the narrative in fiction is something I attempted to replicate in *The Stone Bell* with the character of Gareth/Govan, though not outright imitate. José Arcadio Segundo is a mortal character who discovers that the fabric of his and his family and town's narrative is subject to the change and whim of its author (Melquíades or Márquez – either is recognisable as the author within either an internal or external context). By contrast, I made the decision to write Gareth/Govan as an immortal who bumbles through the linear narrative. For the most part, the various protagonists of each section of *The Stone Bell* are not aware that he is the same character from their various family myths, instead either believing him to be a different version of the same 'pub man' archetype or just to be simply older than he looks. He is, like José Arcadio Segundo, seemingly destined to be tied to his physical location, despite his ability to glimpse outside the narrative.

This linear, relative time would seem to imply – and especially within the structure of the novel, and the author's relationship with their work – that the linear narrative is inherently tied up with pre-destination. José Arcadio Segundo hides from the narrative, outside the boundaries of time, but eventually his 'destiny' catches up with him – after being discovered, he says 'without realizing it' (as if, in fact, the authorial voice has caught up with him) to 'Always remember that there were more than three thousand and that they were thrown into the sea' and dies (page 359). Pre-destination fits together well with established scientific theories regarding

³¹ Regina Janes, *Gabriel García Márquez – Revolutions in Wonderland* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), p.65

temporal relativity – returning again briefly to theoretical physics, Rovelli notes that ‘physicists and philosophers have come to the conclusion that the idea of a present that is common to the whole universe is an illusion, and that the universal ‘flow’ of time is a generalization that doesn’t work’.

The structure of the novel can be considered to function in a similar way. Fiction, by its nature, is illusory, and the novel is a self-contained timestream – a story, written and printed, is immutable. The author tells it and the reader reads it, the state of the events and characters in it must move along the line of destiny that has been laid out for them. Márquez challenges this but, as both the author and the reader are aware, it is fact that the immutability of the printed narrative cannot change. What he does instead is create an awareness of this within his text, to challenge his own narrative as much as possible.

The looping quality of time is evident from the opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The first sentence of the novel is ‘Many years later, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice’ – as mentioned earlier, a perfect example of a ‘performative prolepsis’. Already, at the opening of the book, the reader is caught in the temporal net of the Colonel’s memories. McNerney (p.20) describes this technique as making the narrator ‘equidistant’ from the concepts of the past, present and future, and describes the novel as ‘made up of episodes that revolve on themselves, like a serpent biting its tail; the unnumbered chapters are made up of pieces of stories that create a spiral in time. Chapter after chapter begins with a starting statement, which is unraveled and explained in the most matter-of-fact terms, and ends where it started, having been explained so logically that no other conclusion to it seems possible’. Márquez may write in a stylized way that challenges traditional narrative forms of linearity, but he scientifically returns to the truly linear progression of the novel every time. In this way, his work subscribes to the concepts forming part of the idea of the ‘genealogical imperative’ laid out by Patricia Drechsel Tobin in *Time And The Novel: The Genealogical Imperative*³² - that the ‘elements of a novel, although

³² Patricia Drechsel Tobin, *Time And The Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* (Guildford: Princeton University press, 1978), p.5

fixed in temporal relation to each other, change their shape and fluctuate in their significance, because merely chronological succession becomes informed with the operations of cause and effect, and the novelistic character is seen as having assumed a unique destiny that was nevertheless inevitable’.

Tobin can be seen as theorizing then that while the novel seeks to give a representation of time, it does not necessarily need to follow an exact path, with the author instead concentrating on particular moments in cause and effect. She elaborates further that the ‘novel offers, then, not a mimesis of undeliberated, organic, life-in-time, but a homologue that enacts a privileged conceptualization of human life as purposeful and therefore imbued with meaning’. Tobin justifies the structure of the novel as embracing the interpretation of time according to humanity’s predisposition to seeking spiritual meaning through a belief in predestination, or at least some form of higher power. Linearity exists, but it is dictated – in the case of the novel, by the author, and, within the texts, its narrators and narrative.

The Stone Bell seeks to stretch linearity in a similar way, albeit with the far less complicated method of temporal ellipses. One particular reason for this is the story itself – Márquez’s novel is far longer, with a wider cast, and sets itself out to engage with far more cultural issues in a wider context. In writing *The Stone Bell*, due to the constraints of length afforded by an academic dissertation, I opted to write to my strengths and, utilizing research and personal knowledge, concentrate on telling a story with a particular emphasis on character and contrasting voices.

That is not to say that Márquez does not utilize character a great deal in his writing, with all the members of the Buendia family having distinct personalities and voices. Philip Swanson even writes that the magic of the world in which *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is even dictated by character, or rather by the character of José Arcadio Buendia ‘inviting his offspring to read with their imaginations rather than in relation to their knowledge of reality: in a room plastered with unrealistic

maps and fabulous drawings, he teaches them to read by telling them of ‘the wonders of the world’³³.

With this, Márquez draws the characters’ viewpoints in line with the magical realism genre. *The Stone Bell* attempts to replicate this approach to the genre, with a familial way of telling stories also opening out to form the basis of the reader’s viewpoint. The book about Saint Govan threaded throughout the generations of characters in *The Stone Bell* is a prompt to the reader to approach the story with a degree of the fantastical, as Swanson states Márquez aims to do with José Arcadio Buendía – ‘prompting to read in a ‘marvellous’ or magical way is a possible invitation to the reader to approach the work they are about to read as a playful fictional adventure’.

The locations of both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Stone Bell* are both documented in fictional texts within the novels themselves. As stated above, Melquíades’ papers – the final translation of which proves to be the complete history of the town – play an important part in signaling to the reader the self-conscious structure of the novel. The aim in *The Stone Bell* was to use that same idea to enforce the multi-generational links between the four sections of the book. Even though the family ties are not necessarily cohesive – for example, Daniel being Joe’s son rather than David’s – the mythology of Saint Govan and his chapel is passed down through the characters, being constantly re-written.

The third section of *The Stone Bell*, ‘1973 – Coming Down Again’, is, sitting at the centre of the novel and as the longest section in it, the ‘weightiest’ of the book. It also features the most movement around different locations in the town of Pembroke, making this chapter considering the conjunction of place and time in the narrative perhaps the best place to focus on it.

The opening of the section starts with characters that are initially unfamiliar to the reader – Seren, her young daughter Joanna³⁴, and friend Neil. However, while

³³ Philip Swanson, *The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel García Márquez* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), p.57

³⁴ During the viva voce for this PhD thesis, it was suggested that Joanna’s childlike voice was captured well in her dialogue, and that some acknowledgment of the influence behind this might

the characters are unfamiliar to the reader, they are seen to be feeding the ducks on the Mill Pond, just as Joe's father Niall is so interested in doing in the first section of the novel. The Mill Pond, a large body of water that connects to Pembroke Castle's moat that must be traveled across to reach the neighboring town of Pembroke Dock, carries a great deal of historical significance for the town. The repetition of it in *The Stone Bell's* narrative, as somewhere enjoyed by multiple generations of characters, is a signifier of the importance of the town in general for the characters. Each protagonist of the first three sections of the novel barely contemplates moving somewhere else and starting anew – even at the end of 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again', as Seren ponders the damage done to her marriage, she cannot bring herself to fully consider leaving.

She does, however, ask Neil 'Have you ever wanted to go somewhere else though?' (page 95), before listing several of her issues with the area. Her dissatisfaction – though she ultimately stays to continue raising her family in Pembroke – is somewhat pre-emptive of the opinions of Danny, the narrator of the final section, whose opinions lead to the final collapse of the narrative³⁵. In expressing her dissatisfaction, she provides exposition for the missing space of the temporal ellipsis between this section and the last, explaining that the Dockyard business that her father, grandfather and husband worked for has gone out of business. This was in the interest of maintaining a continuity between the sections of the novel, a particularly important task as 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again' is the first section of *The Stone Bell* to feature no surviving characters from 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels' (excluding Gareth).

From here, it can also be argued that place becomes more important again in relation to the temporal techniques utilized within the novel, as it becomes the central establishing link between this section and the first and ensures that the

benefit a reading of *The Stone Bell*. Joanna's voice was directly influenced by the young daughters of a regular customer of the author's then-workplace, Sophie's Café in Aberystwyth, between 2014-2017. It is important to acknowledge factors such as these as being direct influences in the writing of a text, as they are perhaps the most personal elements an author can bring to their work. However, in keeping the structure of this commentary as a reader's guide paralleling *The Stone Bell*, there was little space to discuss this in the space of this chapter, therefore this footnote is included in acknowledgement of that.

³⁵ This 'final collapse of the narrative' will be expanded upon in Chapter Four.

narrative retains its connection. It was also decided to continue including the family shop – first seen in ‘September 1942 – Damned’ – as this could increase the links between each section of time and provide the family with an alternative form of financial support that was not so reflective of their history of dockyard-based work. This was also important for creating a wider sense of change in society and describing each historical period in a way that was truthful.

Another important recurring location in *The Stone Bell* first appears in ‘September 1973 – Coming Down Again’ – the brewery in the garden of the York public house. The building, with its striking resemblance to St Govan’s chapel, exists in real life, as recorded in Keith Johnson’s *The Pubs of Pembroke, Pembroke Dock, Tenby & South Pembrokeshire* (referred to in Chapter One of this commentary), and the pub itself is regarded as ‘one of the most historic of the town’s hostelries’³⁶ and notes that famed theologian John Wesley held sermons there. Its apparent age signifies the importance of time within the narrative of *The Stone Bell* and how each character is shaped by the surrounding area, and its changing fortunes with the passage of time.

In conclusion, this is intended to be reflective of that ‘natural, organic relationship’ that Tindall wrote has often been recognised in literary imagery – to more explicitly tie the character and their memories and personality shaped by those memories to a place. Within this, the novel as a whole can be viewed again as somewhat representative of the physical place in which it is set, never moving beyond the boundaries of Pembrokeshire (though the characters do, they are never shown within the space of the narrative leaving) and encapsulating repetition among the characters showing both linearity and changes within that linear structure. There are smaller places within the wider space of *The Stone Bell*’s Pembroke setting that are recurring, both to connect the four sections and provide a backdrop emphasizing the plot’s linearity to the reader.

³⁶ Keith Johnson, *The Pubs of Pembroke, Pembroke Dock, Tenby & South Pembrokeshire* (Glasgow: Logaston Press, 2005), p.55

Connecting a reading of *The Stone Bell*'s use of linearity with gaps with the work of Marquez and the temporal implications of *One Hundred Years Of Solitude* is intended to show the variety of directions *The Stone Bell* could have taken. Some earlier drafts of the novel, particularly in the planning stages, took on a less linear perspective with characters only relaying half of their sections at a time, in the style of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. But the ultimate decision, to tell the episodic story of *The Stone Bell* in linear order with the only variation being in tense between narrators, made more sense for the readers' ease. Clayton Hamilton writes that:

'a simple series of events arranged along a single strand of causation, or a succession of several series of this kind strung along one after the other, may not properly be called a plot. The word *plot* signifies a weaving together; and a weaving together presupposes the coexistence of more than one strand.'³⁷

It is hoped that this chapter has presented some of the more complex methods used in the construction of narrative and temporality in a successful way to justify some of the choices made in the writing of *The Stone Bell*, as well as provide a brief overview of the considerations made with regards to techniques used by other authors.

³⁷ Clayton Hamilton, *A Manual of the Art of Fiction* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), p.67

Chapter Four – Reflections on ‘unconscious time’ and the episodic novel

This final chapter of the critical commentary will explore more theoretical ideas relating to philosophy and temporality, more grounded again in a close reading of *The Stone Bell*’s final section, and touching on an understanding of the concept of the chronotope in literature.

‘June 2012 – Something in the Water’ brings the novel’s narrative forward by thirty-nine years, featuring the protagonist character of Danny. Naming this final narrator after Daniel, his great-grandfather, was very much an intentional decision to directly reference the repetition between the generations of characters and more generally emphasise the importance of family throughout *The Stone Bell*. The importance of familial relationships is especially related throughout this final situation, with the most redeeming feature of the unlikeable Danny being the loving relationship he clearly shares with his mother.

MM Bakhtin defines the ‘chronotope’ as:

‘the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature...In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.’³⁸

Therefore, this commentary will address the ‘chronotopes’ of several recurring elements throughout *The Stone Bell* that are evident in its final section, ‘June 2012 – Something in the Water’, as well as the general strands of narrative that weave the novel’s episodic structure together into a fuller story.

³⁸ MM Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p.119-120

Changes in language and voice are an important part of writing changes in time periods, and the more modern setting of 'June 2012 – Something in the Water' is represented immediately with casual swearing and pop culture references. Danny and his mother, Joanna, discuss popular music and drinking culture with ease. Danny, unwittingly referencing his ancestor's interest in seeking mythological comparisons to everyday life, uses mythology to discuss the album 'Grace/Wastelands' by Peter Doherty, saying that the CD cover's design makes the singer look like 'he wants to look like someone you think will be brilliant in the hopes of being remembered for almost being brilliant' (page 156).

While this is a subjective opinion based – as the reader can infer from later parts of the story – on shallow observations, Danny is invoking the interests of his ancestors and therefore their interests in the ambiguities of gaps in history. This is reinforced when he goes on to tell his mother about why vinyl records are fashionable again, re-stating that music enthusiasts are more interested in the constructed myth that nostalgic vinyl records are more appealing than CDs.

Danny's plans for the future provide further exposition of his interest in viewing the narrative from within as 'mythological'. He has constructed a myth based on his expectations (again returning to the 'everyday myths' of Adrian May), rather than folklore, that he will find considerable ease in moving away from his hometown and family roots. This section of the novel is not designed to mock his ambitions, but to present his methods of approaching them as shallow. Danny has great faith in himself that is unfounded – it becomes clear throughout the story that he prides himself on his ability to impress people with his charisma, without ever finishing any of the creative projects that he undertakes. Many of the actions he takes are short-term solutions, and this is summarised in his attempts to justify the amount that he and his best friend Richard drink: 'Binge-drinking is what we do now, and as long as we can get up in the morning, everything will be OK.'

As noted in Chapter Two, Danny's attitudes are presented in a stark contrast with the previous protagonists of *The Stone Bell*. Seren, his grandmother and the narrator of 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again', found herself having to make

short-term plans but rarely in her own interests; she had to encourage her husbands to take a job he didn't want to keep their family together. She took the time to explore the countryside with her best friend so that she could consider her decision as to whether or not she would stay with Steve.

Rachel works her way through her grief over her husband's death and guilt over her affair with his best friend in 'September 1942 – Damned' and, like Seren, is shown struggling with difficult decisions that will ultimately affect others. Perhaps the closest narrator to Danny, then, in terms of personality and selfishness, is the teenage David in 'October 1942 – The Side of the Angels'.

There are other 'mirror' aspects between the first and last sections of *The Stone Bell*, which become 'chronotopes' as defined by Bakhtin, allowing for a 'thickening of time' that makes the story 'artistically visible'. The friendship between Danny and Richard is similar to David and Joe's; for example, Danny's mother says 'It's like the two of you have your own little language' (p.160) which is very similar to David's statement that 'Mam always said that me and Joe speak in our own language' (p.8). They also find themselves in scenarios that are repetitive of David and Joe's – in both time periods, the two friends smoke together, with one finding it more difficult than the other.

They also drink together in the same pub that David and Joe mention in the first section – the Royal Oak. Recurring locations, as discussed in Chapter One, play a large part in emphasising circular narratives in fiction and reflections throughout temporal ellipses, and serve as a reminder in *The Stone Bell* that the narrative is part of continuous novel, as opposed to a collection of short stories. The reader is reminded of the previous events of the novel by the Royal Oak, as it was mentioned in the first section and was briefly visited by Seren in the second. That the characters are part of a larger narrative is only emphasised by Danny and Richard, who discuss both their summer as an ending ('the last hurrah') and a new beginning (Richard jokingly says 'The new adventure starts here' as he opens the door to the pub's beer garden).

The theme of hidden spaces throughout *The Stone Bell* is also represented by Danny's missing father, mentioned as being absent while Danny considers Richard's mother's illness – 'I mean, he didn't die or anything. Or he might have done. I wouldn't know. He's not here' (page 167). The entirely absent father is perhaps the ultimate endpoint of the various father figures throughout the novel, and returns to the affair that set the genealogy of the novel in motion – David's son actually being Joe's son transformed David into a character 'absent' from the rest of the narrative, in spite of his importance as the first narrator of the novel.

Editing this novel – particularly following the completion of the viva voce to examine it – gave some pause for thought regarding how literal the chronotopes featured throughout could be. The magical realism aspect of *The Stone Bell*, hardly featured at all in the first section of the novel and expanded exponentially throughout the subsequent sections, originally (in an earlier draft of the novel) reached a point of near-visibility in the final section. This deleted part of the final section would have seen Danny, after a few drinks in the Royal Oak, is able to 'see a couple of kids, well, teenagers sitting over there in little hipster flat caps and wool trousers' after playing a particular piano chord. This was intended to evoke the point that Danny's plan to leave Pembrokeshire, taking his genealogy away from the area, is signalling the end of the entire family's relationship with Pembrokeshire as they have known it for a century. In witnessing Joe and David about to get into a fight, drawing on the hidden space of the events preceding the start of the novel, it was considered that this would further emphasise this looping quality of time seen as the novel approaches its end.

The fact that Danny goes on to refer to the book of myths continually being written and re-written by his ancestors (and likely his descendants) as 'ghost stories' is also representative of the more supernatural elements of the story coming to the fore as the story reaches its end. The phrase 'ghost stories' implies an element of something dead returning to life in the context of the present, and this carries the implication that telling a story relating to one's history, both personal and mythological, is an act of resurrection. In continually resurrecting the past, Danny's family are endlessly reviving the characters their ancestors interacted with but with

the amendments and alterations with each telling reconstructing those characters in more convoluted, surreal and modern ways.

This book, taken up as a creative project by Danny in a different medium, can be seen to relate to philosophical concepts conflating 'eternity' and 'memory', with eternity being described in relation to memory as 'the single event remembered in all of its qualitative richness and concrete reality seems to be freed from the date it originally had in the chronological order of time; and that the same holds for the self imaginatively re-created through the act of recollection'³⁹. Meyerhoff equates eternity to a sense of timelessness, as opposed to infinite time. When considering literature, he states that 'nothing in human experience is ever forgotten; no voice, no trace, or engram wholly lost' (p.57).

Danny's contribution to his family's great creative project to hold onto their family line in relation to Pembrokeshire's mythology in an 'eternity' is to use what he perceives is progression in the methods of telling stories, by making a film that can be viewed on YouTube. However, in doing this, he is removing himself and his family from the written history that has been fictionalised heavily and towards a more visual medium that, while building on fiction, is easier to compare with reality. His attempt to tackle this discretion in the narrative his ancestors were working on is to embrace the internet culture of 'creepypastas', folk stories shared through the internet to create modern myths that utilise visuals in their attempts to tell a story. The example Richard provides is that of Slenderman, a modern myth originally propagated by the YouTube channel Marble Hornets⁴⁰.

A comparison can be drawn here between the structure of *The Stone Bell* and its 'eternity' of characters being resurrected through shared mythology and a 'substrata' of time that runs through the temporal ellipses in the overall narrative. The 'strata' of 'unconscious time', proposed by Proust⁴¹, was compared by Meyerhoff to Freud's discussion on timelessness and the subconscious – that 'the

³⁹ Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p.56

⁴⁰ Marble Hornets, *Marble Hornets Youtube Channel* (accessed 24/9/18), <www.youtube.com/user/MarbleHornets>

⁴¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Random House, 1927), p.1001

events of the unconscious system are timeless...they are not ordered in time, are not changed by the passage of time, have no relation whatever to time'⁴². Much like the internet with its multiple layers and 'stratas', the structure of the novel – and in particular an episodic novel making use of temporal ellipses – contains within it an 'unconscious time' that the reader must be made aware of through exposition.

Returning to the writing guidelines laid down by Robert Saunders Dowst – though a century old, many of the fundamentals of fiction discussed by Dowst remain relevant – 'novel may set forth irrelevant matter because its length is not only a greater but a more elastic quantity than that of the short story; if the interruptions of the story are not too frequent and sustained, the power of the story over a reader will not be lessened to any appreciable extent' (p.186). Acknowledging that *The Stone Bell* is structured in an episodic fashion, the 'interruptions' provided throughout – not just in terms of the ellipses, but the various digressions in conversation as well as plot – act as an agent of elasticity in the overall narrative, in the hopes of creating a sense of place while also representing the wider worlds of the characters and their intentions.

The magical realist themes, and the subsequent editing of them, must be addressed while acknowledging these 'interruptions' to the narrative. In earlier drafts, there were more instances of visions and dream sequences like the cave sequence in the second section of *The Stone Bell*. However, having more of them included in the text made the magical and 'unconscious' element of the novel become unsubtle and shifted the focus away from the theme of personal and familial memory. Gareth's part in the story was also reduced so as to retain the mystery of the 'unconscious time' and develop tension within the narrative. Because of this, the supernatural elements were greatly reduced as the novel developed – the dream sequences mentioned previously featured angels, ghosts interacting with characters, and an over-arching plot concerning Gareth's life and the reason for his immortality.

⁴² Sigmund Freud, "Das Unbewusste," in *Theoretische Schriften* (Vienna: Int. Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1931), p.104

Editing out a great deal of this strengthened the temporal structure of the novel by allowing this subplot to fall into the 'unconscious time' in the temporal ellipses, as well as the broader history of the family and Pembrokeshire that takes place before the novel begins. The earlier drafts of *The Stone Bell* were written with the intention that the stories of St Govan had taken place and that Gareth was definitely the same man, his immortality a reaction to the deaths of the children in the cave in spite of his faith and the apparent existence of angels. This subplot originally reached its end-point as the novel ends, with Gareth informing Danny that enough of mankind had turned away from religion for him to die in peace.

This was removed in the editing process for being over-complex and because it turned too much of the focus away from the family and their history. While originally the mythological and epic background of Gareth was intended to contrast with their personal issues and secrets, this had the effect of removing the ambiguity of the temporal ellipses and therefore the focus of the novel. Parts of Gareth's subplot are retained, but this is to create further ambiguity and sustain the mythological and magical element in the 'unconscious time'. The magical elements are included to support the themes of family and memory, but it can be acknowledged that they are used more for emphasising these themes than driving the plot forwards.

Removing the majority of the supernatural subplot allowed the novel to be 'unfinished', with Danny commenting, while discussing his family's book, that 'Each person to pick up the mantle has decided it's not finished' and that he accepts that it 'won't end proper, like'. It could be argued that this renders *The Stone Bell* an unsatisfying read – that even the characters in the story are aware that it is a story filled with gaps and lacking a true resolution. This, however, is intentional – again, the themes of 'unconscious time' in both memory and history, are included to drive the plot forwards and the resolution of these themes can be considered to be the novel eventually collapsing back into this 'unconscious time'. The final temporal ellipsis of *The Stone Bell* is left for the reader to interpret, with the ending largely being formed of a summary of the idea of the strength of nostalgia and how it exists within that space of 'unconscious time' in both memory and fiction.

The ending of the novel being a 'final collapse' of the narrative into 'unconscious time' is reflected heavily in the stream-of-consciousness, rambling nature of Danny's narration. His tendency to notice seemingly irrelevant details within the story is of particular prominence, in particular when he is hung-over; as noted in his narration (page 175), 'Hangover brain; it goes many places, but nowhere useful. Especially if you tend to ramble a bit anyway'.

Danny's later moment of catharsis, accepting that he is interested in his genealogical history and relationship to Pembroke (and therefore the previous sections of the novel) serves as a fitting end, indicating that the 'unconscious time' that exists particularly in the temporal ellipses throughout *The Stone Bell* will continue after the story ends, in spite of Danny's control of the narrative. He recognises the sensation of nostalgia, listing sounds that echo the story's previous narrators' experiences, as 'Uncanny, in an unfinished way...like a myth' – this confirms that he has let go of his role as the primary character of the over-arching narrative of his genealogical line, accepting that 'unconscious time' that is populated by the experiences of his ancestors, as well as his descendants (and, as referred to earlier in this commentary, this phrase 'like a myth' was used by Joe in the second section of *The Stone Bell*, emphasising the repetitions shared between characters in the book).

This stands in sharp contrast to earlier in the novel (page 175), where he recounts that in a nearby graveyard there 'are names like mine in there, though I'm not sure if they're actual relatives or just dead people with the same surname. Off-brand meat.' Danny's dismissal of his ancestry and the possibility that his heritage could involve some ambiguity or unconscious nature again emphasises his sense of self-importance and detachment from the narrative of *The Stone Bell* that must be overcome by the end of 'June 2012 – Something in the Water'. He is also unwittingly sharing the contemplations of David in 'October 1912 – The Side of the Angels' (page

27). David, however, states that 'it was nice to know there were more of us out there, even in different times'⁴³.

The use of similar phrasing between the two characters while conveying very different levels of enthusiasm for the novel's themes provides a clear link between the two time periods and again signals the approaching end of the novel. Danny's journey through Pembroke's Main Street to visit his Grandma, Seren, also contains references to other parts of the novel in an effort to further establish the connections between each section. For example, Steve, established as being self-destructive in 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again', is mentioned by Danny as he contemplates his family, in spite of his apparent disinterest.

One aspect of Steve that warrants some brief discussion is his tattoo – described by Danny as being 'Some crappy Celtic knot', it is intended to be a Celtic knot symbolising eternity, as described by Seren in the third section of the novel. The use of a symbol recognising eternity is a self-evident acknowledgement within the text of the overall themes of temporality in the novel, even highlighting the 'unconscious time' in the temporal ellipses as being part of 'eternity', as defined by Meyerhoff as a sense of timelessness. However, Danny does not recognise the Celtic knot as symbolising that – like so many other important factors within the narrative, he dismisses it as something unimportant to him. He has no memory of the tattoo as symbolising that timelessness, partially because he is only concerned with his own, 'conscious time' with little regard for the 'unconscious time' that permeates his life through his familial history.

Even the platitude Danny reads on a fridge magnet in a shop window carries some reference to the 'unconscious time' – he notes that he is being told that 'life isn't about weathering the storm, it's about learning to dance in the rain'. Though this is an often-used platitude, it carries some weight when taken in regards to Danny's ignorance of the 'unconscious time' that informs his own existence so heavily. By 'weathering the storm', the character is concentrating on the negative

⁴³ It is fitting that at this point, David's father tells his son to 'stop daydreaming', considering the similarities between human memory and fiction in relation to the concept of 'unconscious time'.

aspects of his life and history in the town. To 'dance in the rain', however, is emphatic of the character being required to realise that he is a part of that history and use it to make the best of his own experiences – by doing so, he can assert his place in the narrative, as is implied in the novel's ending.

The reappearance of Gareth/Govan in this final stage of *The Stone Bell* also carries with it many indications of the 'unconscious time' that the narrative is collapsing into. The character is shown as not only eccentric and confused, as in previous sections, but also acknowledging his failing memory. When Danny meets him outside Seren's house, the house that has been lived in by the family since the beginning of the novel, Gareth/Govan appears unsure of who is living there. He says that his 'memory's not what it was...getting worse too. Closer I get.'

As he, the character guiding the protagonists through each section, begins to acknowledge the approaching ending of the novel, his memory – the bulk of which is, according to Freud, the 'unconscious' – is openly failing him. Now that Danny has control of the narrative, Gareth/Govan is more aware of his nature as a signifier of the 'unconscious time' in the narrative – often bringing characters together and informing them of seemingly insignificant details of their family history. And as the narration passes to a protagonist less interested in those details, so Gareth/Govan loses his power within that narrative.

Concluding this chapter on 'unconscious time', and acknowledging again that it is an exploration of the nature of temporal ellipses in such an episodic novel structure, I would like to draw a few closing statements on the use of 'unconscious time' and its place in the narrative. I would like to briefly reiterate at this point, in the interests of using this critical commentary as a 'reader's guide' to *The Stone Bell*, that earlier and more complicated drafts of the novel did originally feature Gareth/Govan as a character with a less ambiguous nature. However, during the editing process, it became clear that the character held far more power over the narrative as a signifier of the 'unconscious time' that ultimately retains the structure of *The Stone Bell* through its temporal ellipses. In increasing his ambiguity as a

character, the long-lived saint was able to act as a better guide for the characters to follow the plot, as well as connect the four sections of the novel for the reader.

Gareth/Govan is also notably shown as one of the few characters able to draw Danny out of his external, 'performed' character, irritating him enough (p.181) for Danny to show his anger and comment internally that 'No-one's supposed to see that version of me'. As the narrative progresses, Gareth/Govan also seems able to read Danny's mind. Here, the conscious act of internal narration in the present tense is used to convey Gareth/Govan's power over the narrative from within the 'unconscious time' of which he is a signifier, moving beyond the typical structure of fiction and responding to the text as it is being read.

This is intended again to represent the narrative collapsing into its 'unconscious time' – that he is a character able to communicate with the actual structure of the novel, as opposed to seeing it operating on a purely fictional level. Danny gains some awareness of this, as he is seen to respond to Neil's painting – a reproduction of another, older painting first seen in 'September 1973 – Coming Down Again' – initially within his internal, first-person narration before commenting 'I suppose we sing songs over and over, in different styles' as a line of dialogue. He contemplates that it is 'Odd...speaking out loud', indicating some awareness of the difference between his internal narration and spoken dialogue.

This sequence also leads into a brief discussion of the events of the previous section of *The Stone Bell*, with Seren telling Danny that the day she and Neil shared apple wine was 'an especially bad [day]' – with Danny commenting, internally, that 'it's something that happened a long time ago that I can't do anything about'. This also indicates some unconscious awareness of the narrative, as well as a statement that can be ambiguously interpreted as a general part of the internal narration. This ambiguity is an important part of the narrative and use of the 'unconscious time' that is intended to subtly indicate an internal awareness of that and convey it to the reader.

The fact that Danny is intending to change the media used to convey his family's long-incomplete creative writing project is another important factor in

communicating the novel's meta-textual awareness – that, as the methods of storytelling within *The Stone Bell* change, so too does it pass beyond the conventions of prose fiction. A future, longer project could possibly even involve writing and producing Danny's film from the text as if it were real and post it online (should there be a wide enough audience for the novel), fully completing the novel's transition into internet pseudo-documentary.

It is hoped that by exploring this theme of 'unconscious time', *The Stone Bell* can – with particular regards to 'June 2012 – Something in the Water' and a close reading of it – enable a new understanding of the process of temporal ellipses and how they can move beyond the ending of a novel, enabling the story to end on such an ambiguous note as it does.

Conclusion

In concluding this thesis, I wish to draw attention to the various themes discussed throughout the commentary as well as determine several issues that arose during the writing of the project, in spite of the careful planning involved in writing *The Stone Bell*. Certainly, the use of such wide temporal ellipses may be considered too ambitious for a wordcount of 80,000 words. However, it is hoped that by concentrating on smaller themes of place and character, a worthy novel has been crafted that provides a satisfying read with a great deal of social and historical accuracy.

Writing the location of Pembroke itself did require a great deal of research – perhaps one issue of writing from personal experience is knowing the subject ‘too well’, that an author can slip into over-familiarity and write without adequate description or explanation for a reader to follow. The ‘identity’ of Pembrokeshire – as discussed in the introduction to this commentary – is revealed, ultimately, to be one shared with many other small Welsh towns. This is not necessarily a weakness of the novel – the nature of *The Stone Bell*’s ending is that each place and person within that place is built upon the ‘unconscious time’ of history. Smaller events shape larger events and how they are recorded defines how they shape the present.

The same then, is true of fiction. The difference I hoped to include between *The Stone Bell* and the other works of modern fiction based in Pembrokeshire (such as Hattie Dalton’s 2010 film *Third Star*) is one of accuracy. As covered in Chapter One, great attention was paid to reflecting modern Pembroke as it appears and drawing on the imagery and physicality of the churches and former town walls to describe the town as well as reflect the novel’s themes, with particular reference to the ‘autogenerative’ nature of fiction – that stories can nestle within stories and create further stories. Much like the town of Pembroke itself, this writing project is built upon older works of mythology and uses that to generate a newer work of fiction.

Of particular note here is the use of pub culture, and Keith Johnson’s *The Pubs of Pembroke, Pembroke Dock, Tenby & South Pembrokeshire* proved invaluable

in crafting not only an accurate description of the town, but an insight into the area's social history that aided the formation of an accurate portrayal. Another book to mention, in terms of Pembroke's social history, is Richard Lloyd's *The Legendary Chicken Sandwich*, a semi-fictionalised account of the town's working class citizens' reaction to the Rolling Stones' announcement that they would perform a concert at Pembroke Castle. Culminating in a town meeting where small business owners argue loudly over what would today be considered a trivial matter, this novel was an influential text that offered vivid descriptions of the town during 1973.

In creating the characters for *The Stone Bell*, the decision was made to concentrate on an older, established Pembrokeshire family and show how they – from their mannerisms to their name – changed over the course of the one hundred years of time that the novel occupies. This was intended to allow the characters a great deal of familiarity with the town and surrounding area (even unwillingly, as Danny in the last section is representative of) and their changing opinions of it.

In using a different narrator each time, a variety of voices allowed for the novel to be presented as a collection of four shorter stories that combine to create one larger narrative. The successes of this again depend on the 'unconscious time' that a great deal of the narrative draws upon – that narrative tension can be created by introducing characters and events in the 'temporal ellipses' between each of the novel's four sections, and slowly drawing them out of each narrator's memory or the history that they have been told by their own ancestors.

It is hoped that this critical commentary has created an engaging 'reader's guide' to *The Stone Bell* and allowed for a successful discussion of the novel's themes. Initially, the project was intended as a far looser collection (more akin to *Ghostwritten* by David Mitchell) – however, in studying it further and exploring the themes of the work during the editing process, it has grown into a far more connective, solid work that more suited to critical and philosophical discussion. The notion of the chronotope as a recurring phrase or object that solidifies the time passing through the novel is one that would particularly warrant future discussion or at least exploration in further works of fiction.

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